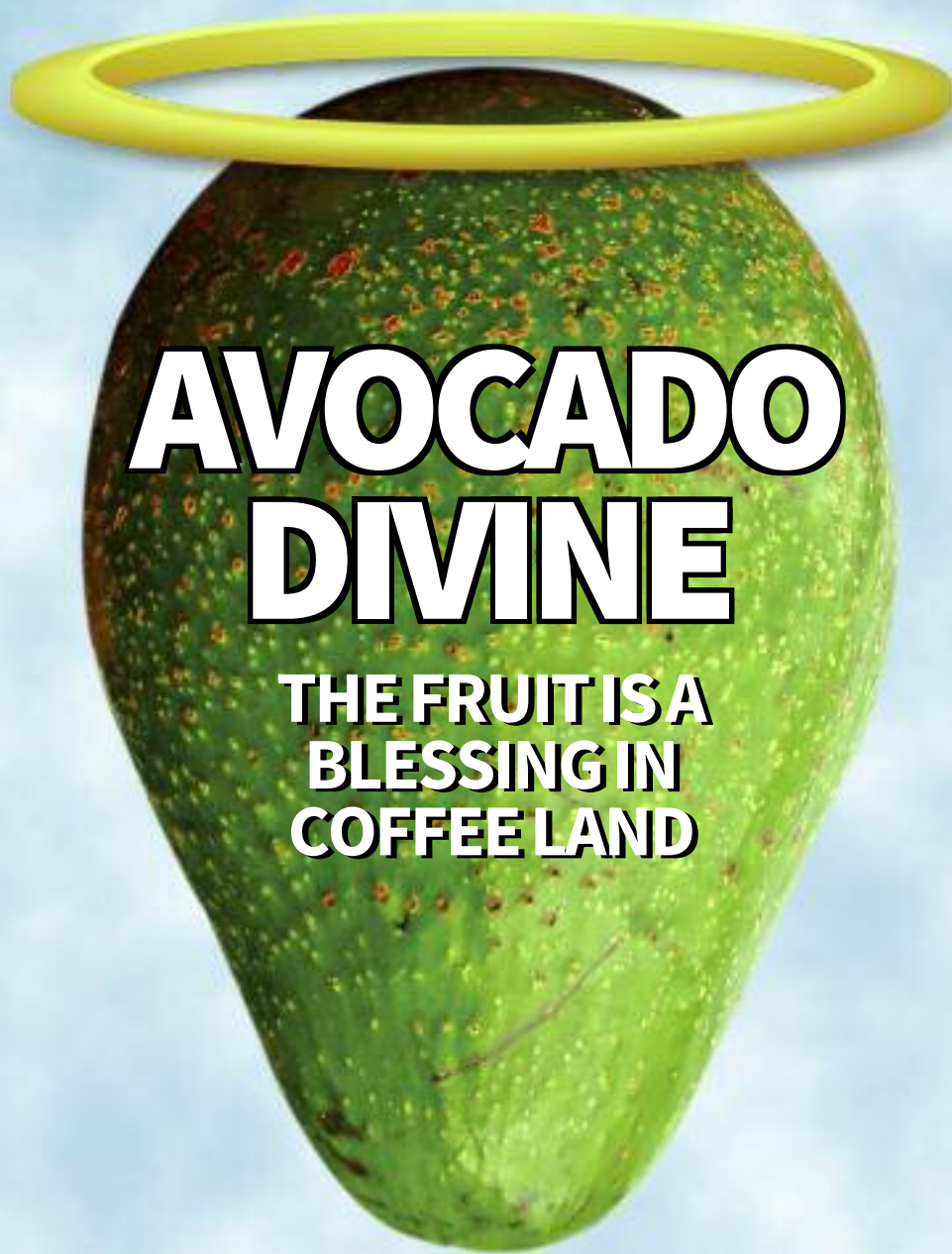


# Civil Society



## AVOCADO DIVINE

THE FRUIT IS A  
BLESSING IN  
COFFEE LAND

### YATRA TRACKS DELIVERY

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# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## Our farm stories

THE avocado cover this month is the latest among innumerable stories we have published on the farm sector. Farmers in our country get a lot of lip service from governments and political parties. Academicians tend to think they have agriculture all worked out. But the reality is that farmers find their own way and try to remain competitive against difficult odds. The infrastructure the country gives them sucks. They lack direct access to markets. Banks treat them shoddily. Worst of all, the obsession with size and corporatisation blinds policymakers to the inventiveness that is possible on small farms and the prosperity that it can translate into. We have written about jackfruit, rice, cocoa, soya, apples and more and each time been surprised by the robust private efforts that are going unnoticed on farms. It is our pitch, therefore, that we need a new orientation towards agriculture and the rural economy and it should begin with listening to farmers.

The MKSS' 100-day *yatra* in Rajasthan is revealing on the ground what governments don't want to admit to in secretariats. Benefits aren't reaching people and in a situation of rural distress grievances are mounting. It is important that technology be used to transfer money and record complaints. But computers and Internet connectivity cannot be a substitute for governance. Nikhil Dey tells us what the *yatra* has been finding out about zero-balance bank accounts, cash transfers and the accountability of officials who respond online to citizens who remain technologically challenged. It is perhaps a measure of the *yatra's* success that MKSS activists got beaten up by men led by a BJP MLA. Their van was smashed and there are many welts to show for the violence that was unleashed on them.

From Pakistan comes the story of Haroon Khalid who has been researching Shiva worship in his search for examples of the syncretic nature of Pakistani culture. It is a great story, especially in these times when Pakistan is identified solely with Muslim fundamentalism and extremist excesses. The occasion for interviewing Haroon is his book, *In Search of Shiva*. But rather than carry it on our books page we have made it the Special Focus of our current issue to emphasise the diversity in our South Asian situation.

Finally, we were excited to find the Multix, manufactured by two great companies, Polaris and Eicher. It is a personal utility vehicle, the only one of its kind, especially designed to meet the needs of buyers in rural India. What we admire is the way Polaris' advanced technology has been married with Eicher's strong understanding of the Indian market to design and manufacture a product which is both original and useful. It is a wonderful example of 'Make for India'.

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Himalaya has created a movement to improve the quality of life of small and marginal farmers through a medicinal plant program.

### People

- Empowerment by generating income
- Linkages between farmer and market

### Planet

- Spreading good agricultural practices
- Providing good quality seeds
- Training farmers on organic farming

### Prosperity

- Assured income source by eliminating iddlemen
- Providing packaging materials and bearing transport cost from farm to Himalaya
- Assuring buy back at a mutually pre-determined price normally 10-15% above market price



## IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



On 6 January when I attended the court I was shocked to find that a long date of 8 February had been given for the investigating officers. The 313 statement had taken a back-seat and the case too has moved backwards. Such delaying tactics in what is supposed to be a fast-track court, by the public prosecutor and the police makes a mockery of the designated court. All this, despite the best intentions of the judge to complete the case soon.

Although the Lt. Governor withdrew 268 recently, this information was first suppressed, and once it leaked out, the copy of the order of revocation has not been provided or acted upon by the jail authorities, though authorised by the Superintendent. The question is: why for six years was my travel to the states, which have cases pending against me, considered a threat. And suddenly why is it not considered so now.

It appears that it was merely a ruse to keep me in jail indefinitely.

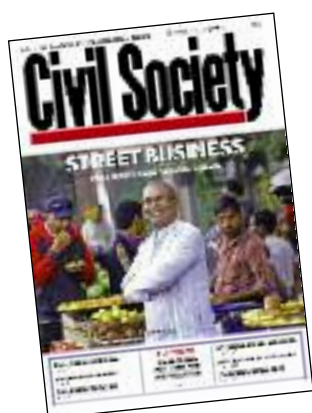
On grounds of being a senior citizen I should be allowed out on bail. I am over 68-years old. I have severe health problems: a heart ailment, blood pressure, kidney problems, eye and skin ailments and acute arthritis. Due to the winter chill I have been suffering from breathlessness and palpitations. On 9 January I was rushed to the cardiologist at the GB Pant Hospital where the doctor noticed serious fluctuations in my ECG.

Under the circumstances if anything happens to me I want to put on record that it will be tantamount to judicial murder.

**Kobad Ghandy**

Letters should be sent to  
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## LETTERS



### Street vendors

Thanks for your cover story, 'Street Business,' on NASVI's efforts to get a very sensible law on the rights of street vendors implemented. It is surprising that this law has not been enforced in Delhi. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) could have set an example. Street vendors have people's support. They have regular customers who sympathise with their plight. Governments may not like them but the common man does.

**Amit Khetan**

I attended NASVI's Street Food Festival and I was impressed by the range of dishes offered. Each was typical of the state it had come from. The food was clean and served with care. I was also impressed with the grace with which vendors handled crowds. Chefs in hotels would have a tough time doing that.

**Kshitij Roy**

*Litti chokha* was an unknown dish from Bihar. Now it's become as famous as the *vada pav* from Mumbai or *chole bhature* from Delhi. Thanks to humble street vendors.

**Suma Mahato**

### Kobad's appeal

*Gautam Vohra has written in asking us to publish Kobad Ghandy's appeal from prison. It is as follows:*

It is six and a half years that I have been in Tihar Jail and my single Delhi case drags on and on even though the only major charge against me is membership of a banned party. A Supreme Court decision stipulates that mere membership without any related charge of violence is no crime.

There is no such charge (of violence) against me, but no relief by any court has been provided to me over this lengthy period of incarceration.

While the judges and lawyers got me interim bail due to my visibly deteriorating health, I was not able to avail of it because of 15 pending cases in other states, which I have not been able to attend since the Lt. Governor of Delhi has clamped Article 268 of the Criminal Procedure Code on me.

While the Delhi case was expected to be completed by last December after our 313 statement was recorded, the public prosecutor has been avoiding presenting 313 questions on two occasions and has now called for re-examination of the two investigating officers, thus delaying the case indefinitely.

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# ‘ONLINE SERVICE DELIVERY IS A COMPLETE NIGHTMARE’

## Nikhil Dey on the findings of the 100-day rural yatra by MKSS

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

THE government's evaluation of schemes and services launched for the poor is far from satisfactory. Are people benefiting and if they are not does it mean they don't need the scheme or is it the problem of delivery?

The Accountability Yatra led by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which began on 1 December 2015, is traversing 33 districts of Rajasthan to get some ground-level facts about whether the poor are getting their entitlements, and if they are not, then who is responsible.

The yatra is being supported by the Campaign for Right to Information and Employment, which consists of around 100 organisations.

In each village, the yatra's bus, equipped with computers, holds a Shikayat Mela or grievances fete. Grievances on rations, pensions, employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), health, education, water and forest rights are being registered online and tracked.

But on 17 January at Aklera in Zalawad district, when MKSS activists were singing songs, a mob allegedly led by Kanwar Lala Meena, a BJP MLA, attacked them with lathis, smashed their bus and destroyed their cameras. Shankar Singh, who is leading the yatra, and Anuraag, a cameraman, were badly injured. An FIR has been lodged.

Perhaps the yatra is raising uncomfortable questions. It has found that the new financial architecture put in place by the government to improve service delivery is causing utter confusion. Online systems to address people's complaints aren't working either.

**‘Assets are being created in infrastructure. In Rajasthan MGNREGA funds have built Atal Seva Kendras. Each panchayat has one.’**

The MKSS also held a press conference in Delhi to highlight the dilemma facing MGNREGA. The demand for work has been steadily increasing, but the states where the scheme is most needed don't have the funds for it. MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of work for one person from each rural household. It is the largest job guarantee scheme in the world.

Six states, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh, are in the throes of a drought with some facing a second season of deficient rainfall. Altogether 12 states have informed the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) that they have spent all MGNREGA funds allotted to them.

MGNREGA works as a safety net for the poor in rural areas. The increase in demand for employment under the scheme can be seen as a sign of growing rural distress caused by drought and neglect of the rural economy.

A letter written by the MoRD to the Ministry of Finance, accessed by the MKSS through RTI, specifically asks for the ₹5,000 crore promised in the last Union Budget by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley over and above the ₹43,699 crore allotted.

Drought-hit states want to increase workdays from 100 to 150 and pay the millions of workers on their muster rolls. The letter says states have spent 95 per cent of the ₹34,699 crore allocated for the scheme in the last Budget.

We spoke to Nikhil Dey, a key leader of the MKSS, on finances for MGNREGA and the lessons learnt from the ongoing yatra in Rajasthan.

**Is this the first time states are increasing employment from 100 to 150 days and asking for more money?**

Not at all. The last phase of adequate funding for MGN-



Nikhil Dey: 'People's grievances are self-defined and can't be

REGA was 2010-11. The slide started in P. Chidambaram's time. States have been chasing the Central government for funds even though MGNREGA is a demand-based programme in which funds are supposed to be automatically released. The situation worsened last year when the NDA government cut the existing small budget for MGNREGA by ₹3,000 crore.

Subsequently, they seemed to have realised that MGNREGA is providing relief for rural distress. The signalling came from the PMO and the top bureaucracy. So the ₹5,000 crore that was mentioned for MGNREGA in last year's Budget speech came from some understanding that the scheme would be protected.

Then came the drought. This isn't the first time states have increased the number of days of employment to 150. But, in a departure from earlier practices, proposals for an additional 50 days of work can be cleared by the MoRD. States don't have to wait for a Cabinet meeting. The six drought-affected states have got their proposal passed by the MoRD. But the Rural Development Ministry has no money and is putting up a brave face.

**How bad is rural distress in the drought-hit states?**

It is very bad and there is nothing to turn to. When crops were destroyed by a hailstorm, some evaluation was done. For drought there is no such assessment. Bundelkhand and Vidarbha are badly hit. Everywhere you go, if the food security law, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and MGNREGA are not working, there is an alarming rise in levels of starvation.

**What is the estimated shortage of funds?**

About ₹7,000 crore. The MoRD is asking for ₹5,000

LAKSHMAN ANAND



boxed into a charter'

should have a playground. You can fence it with MGNREGA funds. MGNREGA also has a tree scheme. If any institution or person plants trees, they get ₹20 per tree per month for five years for upkeep. So, if the school plants 500 trees on its playground, it will get ₹6,000 per month for maintenance. In Pali the district collector has started a brick building unit. Schools can build storage spaces for food grain. So can farmers.

Some states have a *talaab* component. There has been a saturation of water conservation works too. MGNREGA has been dovetailed with toilets and Indira Awas Yojana houses.

These works require convergence between departments. And departments don't want to converge because they get subjected to social audits and transparency mechanisms under MGNREGA.

#### **But the opposing view remains that there is a whole lot of leakage.**

That needs to be substantiated. A programme of ₹40,000 crore will have some leakage. MGNREGA has a lot less corruption and more transparency than other programmes.

MGNREGA does have high levels of inefficiency. But that is because government officials are unwilling to do their work. You can't have work without management. They can't make money so they would rather not run the work at all.

The other reason is that MGNREGA has a class reaction. Contractors, the mining sector are affected by the bargaining power that MGNREGA has given to the poor and the landless.

#### **Is there a case for a fund for administrative costs for MGNREGA?**

There is. Currently, six per cent is being spent. It is incredible that on this small sum you can run MGNREGA with its own staff, barefoot engineers, junior technical assistants, one person in each panchayat.... It's a very cost-effective programme.

We are asking for one per cent in addition to the six per cent to be spent on social audit, accountability, transparency and citizen participation.

#### **MGNREGA is getting a bad name because of delays. How can worker confidence be restored?**

Three ways. The first is funds. People don't get work because there is no money. If they do get work there is no money to pay them. But there is provision for compensation for delayed payment of wages. That has never been enforced. The reason is that the state government is supposed to pay that compensation. They say the Centre is not giving them funds. So what is on the verge of being done, perhaps from 1 April, is that the Central government will automatically pay compensation, depending on the days of delay, into workers' bank accounts. The recovery of

that money will be worked out between the Centre and the states later.

The second issue is delay in terms of fund flow.

The third is payment of minimum wages. You cut their wages by half, that's like giving them 50 days instead of 100 days of work. Workers must be paid minimum wages indexed to inflation.

#### **Why a *yatra* across Rajasthan?**

For years we have been fighting for the entitlements and rights of the poor and their stake in the development framework. We want an overall governance structure that allows people to ensure the administration delivers. The question of accountability has been knocking on our doors. We have the RTI law so we can use it to know but we can't use it to make things better. Neither can the RTI commission.

Nineteen states now have Public Service Guarantee mechanisms. They have placed governance in a consumer framework. A Citizens' Charter is drawn up. It says these are the services we will provide and if you don't get them this is where you will complain and this is who will look after your complaint.

The other side of improving governance is to place everything online. Governments think by going online they are making a quantum leap in resolving service delivery.

Both methods have fundamental flaws. Government servants are getting incredibly high salaries with no accountability. Public Service Guarantee is placed within this structure. So if I don't get my rations I complain to the DSO who will scratch around and then send me an SMS saying your job is done. There is nothing I can do.

People's grievances are self-defined. They can't be boxed into a charter. Their grievance might be that the teacher does not come to school and teach our children. The charter says if you don't have a ration card you can complain here. But the bulk of my grievances don't fall under that definition. My grievance must push the system to respond to me.

The whole idea of public hearings and face to face meetings is that it gives the citizen some strength. If I am facing an official alone with a billing problem he may say, pay your bill or go to hell. Or he may send me an email saying my grievance has been attended to even if it hasn't. But in a public hearing with 100 people complaining about billing, the official is immediately apologetic and promises to fix it.

The grievance redressal system in all these states is web-based. Even if you complain in writing you will get your answer online. They say, oh, we dealt with 90 per cent of grievances and 70 per cent were satisfactorily dealt with.

#### **How many complaints have you tracked?**

In this *yatra* we have filed 5,000 grievances on the government's web portal and we are tracking what they do. This is the first time someone is tracking them. Earlier, when we disputed what they were saying, we had only anecdotal evidence.

So an elderly person complains she has not received her pension for six months. She gets a response that says her pension has been released and her grievance has been disposed of satisfactorily. Now which bank has it gone to, how many months of pension have been paid and into which account? The bank she goes to chases her away. Rural banks are overloaded.

*Continued on page 15*

**'We want an overall governance structure that allows people to ensure the administration delivers. The question of accountability has been knocking on our doors.'**

crore because they feel they can tide over till the next year even with a shortfall. If you take 2010-11 as a base year, its expenditure allocation was ₹40, 100 crore. If you add inflation it should be ₹62,000 crore at today's prices. But the allocation was ₹34,000 crore.

#### **What are the assets that states are building with MGNREGA?**

The first concentration was on agriculture. Now it has moved from working on common land to individual assets of SC/ST families and small farmers. Andhra Pradesh, for instance, has identified 45,00,000 acres of individual allotted land of very poor quality to try and develop it for horticulture. If they succeed they will be giving one acre to a poor family. This is major sustainable sustenance for 20,000 families.

Assets are being created in infrastructure. In Rajasthan MGNREGA funds have built Atal Seva Kendras. Every panchayat has one. It provides online connectivity and is a vital backbone. Our school campaign has resulted in the government issuing orders that all 80,000 government schools



A young civil defence volunteer urges citizens to fight air pollution



A traffic policeman with a mask tries to discipline traffic on a busy street

# WHERE CAN DELHI GO FROM ODD AND EVEN?

Civil Society News  
News Delhi

THE odd and even number plate experiment with personal cars delivered many surprises in a city swamped by pollution and congestion. Validated studies are awaited, but for 15 days from 1 January an estimated 20 to 30 per cent of New Delhi's 2.7 million cars stayed off the road. Jams eased, speeds improved and vehicular pollution went down. Interestingly, in a city infamous for road rage and flouting of rules, there were few violations. People participated by using buses, car pools, getting to places before 8 am, or just staying home on days that their number plates didn't match.

It was all quite incredible for a city that is the country's largest car market. But at the end of the odd-even exercise, is New Delhi a better-managed city? Is the air safer to breathe? Are people ready to give up their cars even when not being watched and penalised? Is there a new vision for public transport?

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has been quick to declare odd-even a success and proof that it has the will and ability to govern. The party is chuffed and has also held a celebratory public event. Yet, as the scheme ended it was clear nothing had seriously changed. The toxins in the air have gone nowhere and the streets continue to be clogged with messy traffic. New Delhi remains the most polluted city in the world.

Odd-even was meant to be an emergency measure to bring down alarming levels of winter pollution. There are contradictory findings on the extent to which it impacted air quality. It did succeed in taking vehicles off the road — fewer vehicles moving at faster speeds meant a reduced emissions load.

Overall pollution, however, remained very high. Clearly, much more needs to be done to deal with multiple sources of pollution and change the ways in which people commute using public transport.

"Compliance with the odd-even scheme indicates that the citizens of New Delhi and the National Capital Region have an appetite to deal with the problem of pollution. They have come to realise the harm that is being done to their health and they seem ready to do something about it," says Chandra Bhushan, Deputy Director-General of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

## MULTIPLE MEASURES NEEDED

"But the odd-even scheme is only a tiny part of a much bigger solution involving multiple measures. If AAP is serious it has to also take two-wheelers, which are highly polluting, off the road. It has to shut down the Badarpur thermal plant and stop the burning of garbage," explains Bhushan. "A large percentage of households continue to use coal and wood for kitchen fires. They should be provided with LPG. Dust needs to be removed through vacuuming of roads and control of construction activities. The AAP government has a lot of work to do."

"Odd-even schemes are at best emergency measures used in cities elsewhere in the world to bring down pollution or reduce congestion. What New Delhi and the NCR need is a systemic solution. You need a unified public transport system with last-mile solutions. At present you might travel 25 km by Metro very quickly but spend just 45 minutes getting from the Metro station to your destination," says Bhushan. "Delhi should learn from cities elsewhere in the world where commuters can use multiple modes of trans-



Staff members of Nagarro, a software company, took to car pooling

port with ease and mostly with a single ticket."

Fixing Delhi's transportation needs is complex and calls for sophisticated solutions based on a vision for the city and the requirements of its diverse population. For instance, reallocating road space is important because vehicles, which account for just 30 per cent of road users, currently domi-



PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA



be pavements and cycle tracks as well and people should feel encouraged to give up their cars.

### OUTDATED IDEA

“It is unclear whether the AAP government has any serious commitment to public transportation,” says Dr Geetam Tiwari, Professor at IIT Delhi. She is the Chair of TRIPP or the Transportation Research and Injury Research Programme.

“Odd-even schemes are now 40 years old and have been tried elsewhere in the world and have not been successful. If the AAP government were serious about solving Delhi’s problems, it would have learnt from this experience.”

“Short-term measures delay long-term solutions. The odd-even scheme or making 5 km of road free of vehicles end up being publicity stunts with

act quickly to salvage its image. In the odd-even scheme it found a quick way out. With citizens concerned over pollution and willing to cooperate, the government has been eager to project the scheme as an achievement when in fact it may be doing very little for pollution in the long term.

“We were surprised when they decided to take cars off the road because it is established that cars only account for 20 per cent of the air pollution in Delhi. So what real purpose does an odd-even scheme serve?” asks Dr Tiwari.

### FINDINGS AWAITED

Dr Tiwari’s researchers at TRIPPS are doing a detailed study of commuter behaviour and travel time during the two weeks of the odd-even scheme. This will show how many people shifted to buses,

the metro, car pools, or left home before the 8 am deadline to return after the 8 pm deadline.

Till such findings come in, there is anecdotal evidence of a spirited response from groups of citizens. We couldn’t track a meaningful number, but people we did manage to speak to had been forming car pools and taking contract buses. It is efforts like these, prompted mostly by concern over the harmful effects of pollution, that helped odd-even to be seen as working.



Transport minister Gopal Rai at a meter that monitors air pollution

### CAR AND BUS POOLS

There were companies such as Nagarro and Snapdeal that took the lead. The two companies have offices near each other so they have been able to pool bus routes. If in any area there are 20 Nagarro employees and 10 from Snapdeal then the same bus is used.

“Earlier, we used to run cabs and were having only one shift from 9 am to 6 pm. But now we have tied up with shuttle.com for bus routes and have introduced two shifts, from 8 am to 5 pm and the usual 9 am to 6 pm. Every bus does two routes twice, which has resulted in 150 cars not being used,” says Megha Jha, spokesperson for Nagarro.

“The 8 am to 5 pm shift timing avoids both morning and evening rush hours. Nagarro is flexible about timing, so it is up to the employees in which shift they want to work,” Jha says.

Pratyush, who earlier used a cab to come to the Nagarro office in Gurgaon, now uses the bus service. From his home near Connaught Place, he takes the Metro to Dwarka and from there he uses the office shuttle bus service. It has reduced his travel time by half an hour.

Jagraj, Sugandha, Yashika and Ishaan used to drive to the office in their individual cars from north Delhi. But with the implementation of the odd-even rule they started carpooling as among them they have two even and two odd numbered cars.

Says Jagraj: “Now, as we all four carpool, I need to drive only once in four days. Driving and facing traffic on a daily basis is very hectic but once in four days it is ok.” Says Yashika: “Even when you are driving, travelling with three of your friends is a lot better than driving alone.” ■



A civil defence volunteer plays Munnabhai and hands a rose to a defaulter

almost no sustained impact on the way people commute. In fact, they deflect attention from the real problem,” explains Dr Tiwari.

Dr Tiwari was part of the TRIPP team that designed the first bus rapid transit (BRT) system for Delhi. Ironically, while celebrating odd-even, the AAP government has begun dismantling the first BRT experiment without seeking to analyse what really went wrong with it.

Dealing with air pollution never figured in AAP’s election promises though it did say that it would bring more buses. In the past year the AAP government has invested little time in serious consultation on either air pollution or buses.

Peak pollution levels during winter and the matter being in court, forced the AAP government to

nate. But merely banning big personal vehicles is also not the solution. A combination of incentives and disincentives is needed to make the use of personal transport costlier and with it must come efficient alternatives as well. An effective public transportation system draws heavily on urban design. So, while Delhi needs many more buses, there should



Hanif Kureshi, Thanish Thomas and Akshat Nauriyal of St+art with artist Rakesh Kumar (third from left)

# Delhi gets a facelift with street art

Ajit Krishna  
New Delhi

**L**ODHI Colony is a leafy locality in central Delhi nestled with yellow housing. It's now in the throes of a passionate makeover. Armed with paint and brush, artists from all over the world have converged here to convert it into India's first public art gallery.

The fourth edition of the Street Art Festival is on. It started in December 2015 and will continue till end-February. Twenty-four artists from India and abroad are transforming three dreary locations — Lodhi Colony, the Okhla Container Depot and the Govindpuri Metro Station — with the vibrant colours and vigorous images that typify street art.

"Lodhi Art District will be the first public space of its kind in India," explains Hanif Kureshi, co-founder and artistic director of St+art India.

The colony's makeover is a collaborative effort involving St+art, the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) and the Swachh Bharat Mission. "The colony is centrally located and pedestrian-friendly so it is an ideal space for a public art gallery. Besides, walls here are perfectly aligned making them a great canvas to paint on. You can walk from mural to mural," says Kureshi.

On one wall French artist Chifumma has painted the Padma Mudra, a yogic hand gesture, and fused it with a Khmer pattern from Cambodia. Japanese artist Suiko has created a Chinese character design on another wall.

Raju, a street vendor, whose stall is in front of a mural painted by Australian artist Reko, says the



Chifumma's yogic hand gesture has been fused with a Khmer pattern from Cambodia



Suiko's use of Chinese characters is striking

place looks cleaner and prettier. "It's helping my business because people stop to admire the murals and then eat my *chole bhature*," he says with a grin.

Amitabh, an Indian artist, is more pensive. He says he wants to depict the history of Delhi and capture its fading magic with his brush. "I am painting characters from the *Mahabharata*. Eklavya's dog is the narrator for my story," he says.

At the Okhla Container Depot around 2,000 con-

tainers are handled every day by some 10,000 workers. St+art is planning to paint 100 containers in the parking lot. "This is a really busy hole in the city, crowded and kind of neglected," says Giulia Ambrogi, co-founder and curator of the festival. "It's a good place to interact with people who are not exposed to art at all, like truckers. So creating a hub for a month here dedicated to art and culture will be an interesting case study in dynamics."



Reko's giant mural makes passersby stop and Raju, the choley bhature vendor, does more business



Anpu Varkey brightens up a bland yellow wall

"Containers are a kind of wonder box," she remarks. "You can create almost everything. They can be like big canvases in the city."

Reko is painting 19 containers. He is working on a diamond pattern which, he says, reflects his own community back in Australia. "I want to leave some part of me and my family here through my art," he says.

Truckers who wait here for hours had started play-

ing cricket on the parking lot when it was vacated for the artists. Curious about the artists, they follow them around and help out in placing containers.

"I don't know what they are doing but it looks like they are doing something good," say D.S. Tomar, a transporter, looking puzzled at the paint brigade.

Agostino Lacurci, an artist from Italy, will be painting murals on the walls of the Govindpuri Metro Station, to make the station look vibrant.

Street art preps up nondescript localities and helps their economies. "You get a reason to go walk in a specific area. That's what we observed in our first project at Shahpur Jat. People would walk around with maps, looking at the walls. Then they would stop to have a coffee or something," says Ambrogi.

With a street art makeover, people tend to keep their localities cleaner. After all, when broom and brush work together great things happen. ■

# SEARCHING FOR SHIVA IN

## Haroon Khalid's incredible personal journey

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**I**N the face of rising extremism and intolerance Haroon Khalid, journalist and educationist, sets off on a journey in the reverse direction. He goes off to explore Pakistan's folk religious culture and uncovers its links to Hinduism and history. He then writes a book with an intriguing title, *In Search of Shiva*.

Shiva in Pakistan? In his book, Haroon identifies shrines in the names of Sufi saints dotted on Pakistan's landscape that have survived the trauma of time and the onslaught of puritanism. Revered by ordinary folk, most of these shrines pre-date Partition. Their religious practices are still a veritable mix of folklore and tradition. Each shrine he visits has a story to tell and some hark back to the Indus Valley Civilisation.

There is a shrine where women worship the phallic symbol for fertility, reminiscent of the cult of Shiva. In another shrine there is a wishing tree where women fast for nine days, the Muslim version of the Hindu festival of Navratri. Haroon also draws an analogy between the dervish dance and the dance of Shiva.

The middle class in Pakistan, too, unconsciously practises traditions that are syncretist. Connections between Islam and Hinduism — the *qawwali*, Sufi saints, folklore, poetry — are very old.

But such cultural synthesis, remnants of Pakistan's indigenous traditions, are unlikely to survive. The country has turned its back on its South Asian roots. The state has for decades promoted a conservative stream of religion.

Haroon studied anthropology at the Lahore University of Management and Sciences. He writes for Pakistan's *Friday Times*, Nepal's *Himal*, and the Indian website, *scroll.in*.

His first book, *A White Trail*, was a sensitive portrayal of Pakistan's religious minorities. *In Search of Shiva* is a brave book and hopeful. Perhaps, maybe,



Haroon Khalid: 'There is universality in the religious experience of humanity'

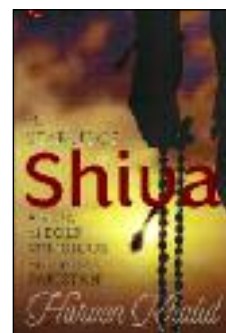
sometime in the future, Pakistan will acknowledge its long forgotten pluralistic identity and be proud of it.

*Civil Society* spoke to Haroon about his journey of discovery and his new book.

**You explored Pakistan's folk religious practices during a difficult time. How did the idea originate and what motivated you to go ahead?**

Unfortunately, the difficult times in Pakistan have continued for a long period. I came of age in these 'difficult' times. In fact, my motivation to embark on a writer's journey is primarily due to these difficult times.

I grew up in the shadow of 9/11, which resulted in further polarisation and Islamisation of my society. Instances of religious violence increased by several



*In Search of Shiva*  
A study of folk religious practices in Pakistan  
Haroon Khalid  
₹295  
Rupa Publications

fold in the decade following 9/11. Hence, religion became a part of all discourse — political, economic and cultural. It was in this climate that I started exploring the folk religious practices of Pakistan, traditions that defied religious extremism.

Perhaps, if times had not been difficult in Pakistan, I would never have explored these shrines and traditions because there wouldn't have been any need. However, given that things turned out so badly, I felt that it is essential to share and celebrate these stories of syncretism and inclusivity.

**You have also delved into research, in history, folklore, philosophy, and into understanding Hinduism for your book. Did you receive help**

**and encouragement for your research? Were there hindrances as well?**

I have been studying the philosophy, history and folklore of Hinduism for quite some time now. When I started, people I know used to be surprised at my interest. It is very unusual for a Pakistani Muslim to be interested in Hinduism. Our entire nationalism is premised on this separation of Hinduism from Islam and hence Pakistan. Therefore, you can imagine the curiosity that my fascination would inspire in people.

Initially, my family members and friends would ask me genuinely why I wouldn't study Islamic history or heritage. They would tell me that I am a Hindu at heart. They would then joke, during India-Pakistan cricket matches, that I must support India. This also highlights how closely religiosity

# PAKISTAN

and nationalism are entangled here. Just a couple of days ago, I told one of my old friends whom I met after a long time the name of my new book. “You are still stuck there,” he replied with surprise.

## What has made the shrine culture survive despite Partition and rising puritanical thought?

For one, the shrine culture is deeply embedded in the psyche of the people here. These shrines are centuries old. A lot of Sufis were also poets, like Baba Farid, Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah. Their poetry forms an integral part of folk culture. Therefore, it would be impossible to remove their influence from society without radically changing its culture, which is what is happening now, unfortunately.

One can see radicalism and intolerance moving from the periphery of society into its mainstream. Only recently a large segment of the lawyer community protested against a local beverage called Shezan owned by an Ahmadi family. A few days ago, traders of the most important plaza here that sells mobile phones and computers refused to cater to Ahmadi clients.

With puritanism and intolerance creeping into our society these shrines are also coming under threat. Almost all the major shrines of our country have been bombed. The educated middle class is also moving away from such syncretism and preferring a more literal and puritanical version of Islam.

Having said that, I would also not glorify these shrines as emblems of tolerance and syncretism. In principle, such Sufi shrines represent tolerance, but in practice, they are becoming intolerant. Till a few years ago women were allowed access into the Qawwali Hall at Dara Darbar, the largest shrine in Lahore, but now they are not. Another example is that of Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab. His surname, Qadri, suggests that he belongs to the Qadri sect, a Sufi sect.

## What was your best experience while exploring shrines?

The stories that I have covered for the book have been compiled over a couple of years. Initially, I was shocked to see a Muslim shrine where dogs are revered or a shrine where every year thousands of transgender people get together to celebrate a Muslim Sufi saint.

However, very soon, I realised that my fascination came purely from my vantage point — my education and geographical location. For locals these were regular shrines and religious practices. They were ordinary. It was this ordinariness of these extraordinary shrines that I enjoyed the most.

When I went back home and did my research I found out that almost all of these practices go back thousands of years, some even to the ancient civilisation of the Indus Valley. It is because of this very reason that for locals these shrines are ordinary.

Their ancestors have been revering them for thousands of years.

What was also fascinating to learn is that such religious traditions existed in multiple ancient societies. For example, in Pattoki I discovered the shrine of a Muslim saint who used to keep stray dogs for company. After his death, his dogs lived at his shrine and became sacred.

Centuries ago, the cynics of Greece used to do the same. The Holy Fools of early Christian sects also had a similar practice. Close to Chechawatni, I found a Muslim shrine where women make phallic offerings to pray for a child. You will find such fertility cults in all ancient societies. Looking at the common thread of all such religious traditions, it is safe to say that there is universality in the religious experience of humanity.



The shrine of Ghore Shah where toys are offered at the grave of the saint

**‘I found out that almost all of these practices go back thousands of years, some even to the ancient civilisation of the Indus Valley. It is because of this very reason that for locals these shrines are ordinary.’**

## The Chisti order, as you write, is inclusive and plural and revered by both Muslims and Hindus. Why is the syncretism of Pakistan’s culture practised but not acknowledged?

That’s because Pakistan’s nationalism is premised on the concept of exclusivity. The Two-Nation Theory, which is believed to be the *raison d’être* of Pakistan, propagates the idea that Hindus and Muslims are two different nations. Even if in principle the theory was used to make a political argument it has now been internalised. Therefore, any association with Hinduism or the Hindu past is believed to be a corruption of nationalism and religiosity. So you will see several religious traditions in Pakistan that originate in the Hindu past but to admit that would be difficult as it would lessen their significance.

A few years ago (the festival of) Basant in Lahore was banned. One of the biggest arguments against it

was that it represented Hindu culture. A reason why the middle class does not go to shrines anymore is primarily because shrines are perceived as being influenced by Hindu culture.

Nowadays there is vibrant opposition to celebrating *mehndi* in Pakistani weddings because that too is believed to be a corruption from the Hindu past.

Therefore, in instances where syncretism still thrives there seems to be a sense of shame and wrongdoing. New stories and legends are created to explain the origin of the tradition or shrine, lest its Hindu past come back to haunt them.

For example, in the book I talked about an ancient banyan tree which is still revered by locals. Given the size of the tree, there is no doubt that it predates Islam and must have been revered by Hindus along with Muslims in pre-Partition India. However, after the creation of Pakistan it became impossible to worship a relic from the Hindu past. Hence a grave of a Sufi saint mysteriously came into existence and a new legend about the sacredness of the tree was crafted.

## What has been the initial reaction to your book in Pakistan?

The book has been published in India so it takes a little while to get to Pakistan. It has only recently started popping up at bookstores here so I still have my fingers crossed. But I have been writing about such traditions and the non-Muslim history of Pakistan for almost a decade now and I have always received a positive response. All my readers and friends have expressed fascination with my research. One of my friends, who heard about the book, wants to work on a documentary with me.

But one needs to bear in mind that I write in English hence I cater only to a particular kind of audience. I have always been reluctant about translating my work into Urdu lest it be misunderstood. So, perhaps, to say that my work has been positively received in Pakistan would only be talking about a limited audience.

## Did your last book, *A White Trail*, lead to some change?

I would like to believe so. My first book came out in 2013 and since then a number of interesting projects have been undertaken. A few months after my book

was launched, a coffee table book from Pakistan that documented Hindu temples in the country was published. A friend of mine is now publishing another coffee table book on the religious festivals of minorities in Pakistan. A couple of academic books too have been published recently and there are a few in the pipeline.

Of course I cannot take credit for the wonderful work that people are doing but when I started talking about the cultural heritage of religious minorities in Pakistan there were only a couple of other writers and journalists in the country writing about such issues. Now there are several. Hence one can see that there is an increasing interest in religious minorities in Pakistan. Politically, of course, things haven’t changed much. But, given that many more voices are being raised, I am optimistic that things will change. ■



Doctors For You providing medical aid during the Nepal earthquake



A doctor examines a patient after devastating floods

# Little learning from disasters

## Doctors For You has suggestions from the trenches

**Civil Society News**  
New Delhi

SEVERAL major natural disasters in the past few years have destroyed properties, taken lives and pushed tens of thousands into poverty. These episodes have occurred across India and on a scale not witnessed before. Catastrophes in Uttarakhand, Kashmir and, most recently, Chennai, have shown up local administrations as being unable to cope with the huge demands made on them in such situations. Clearly lacking is preparedness to deliver emergency medical aid, rescue people and rehabilitate survivors.

Government can't do without the efforts of voluntary agencies and the latter need the support of the government to be effective. There is an urgent need for shared learning. Doctors For You has served in the trenches of these emergencies. They have been working closely with the Union and state governments and district administrations to provide quality medical relief. As public-spirited physicians it has

been their mission to strengthen health services. But what have they learnt in the disaster situations that could perhaps lead to more coordinated efforts?

Right on the top of the list of their concerns is the complete lack of planning. "There is no preparedness for what needs to be done during a disaster," says Dr Rajat Jain, vice-president of Doctors For You. "It is well known that certain areas are prone to earthquakes, floods, landslides or cyclones but there is no planning for what needs to be done during a calamity."

Even in the case of the unprecedented calamities witnessed in Chennai, Uttarakhand and Kashmir it would have helped if there had been at least a minimum plan in place. Across states there is inadequate preparation for worst case scenarios. For instance, if a hospital is destroyed what should be an alternative facility? Or if people have to be rescued and moved out, where should they be put?

"The attitude is the typically Indian one of dealing with a situation when it arises. But that is just not good enough in emergencies on the scale that we have been witnessing. We have to be ready with

specifics," says Dr Jain.

It is not as though disaster management plans don't exist. Some plans have been well drafted, based on established models, but they exist only on paper. They haven't been read, internalised and made locally relevant. "There was a state we were working in which

**It is also important for governments to identify the voluntary agencies they want to work with and have them on tap even before an emergency situation arises. It is necessary to assign lead roles so that there is better coordination and in the administration there is acceptance of voluntary agencies.**



Dr Ravikant Singh training health workers in Begusarai



in Uttarakhand

Dr Ravikant Singh, president of Doctors for You, points out that it often takes time to get government permissions to serve in a disaster zone. It took two days for permission in Chennai. If the government acknowledges in advance whom it wants and needs to work with the permissions can come that much faster.

Often governments at the state and local level don't want to admit that they aren't prepared, says Dr Ravikant Singh. Bringing in voluntary agencies is like admission of failure. So it becomes a political question. The reluctance to admit that the government can't do without the support of voluntary agencies leads to delays. Coming to terms with these realities in advance can save time and lives.

Working in a disaster zone means coping with innumerable issues and uncertainties. "If it took two full days to get permission in Chennai it took a lot of time in Kashmir. It took us a lot of time also to gain acceptance among the people there. When our assessment team went there people turned them away saying they had come from the government and they didn't want government help," says Dr Jain.

Disaster situations therefore pan out differently. Creating universal systems, choosing players objectively well in advance and educating people about emergency measures can do away with the uncertainties and speed up interventions in situations when no time should be wasted.

It is also important to have a longer vision for restoring normalcy. "Once the media is gone and the cameras have been switched off, relief work begins to slacken," says Dr Jain. "We have also seen that in a disaster VIP areas get the most attention. But it is the nearby rural areas that are the worst affected and they don't get the attention they should. There should be some rationalisation of this aspect," says Dr Jain.

In Uttarakhand and Kashmir, for instance, relief efforts haven't been completed. A great deal of repair and restoration remains to be done. "In Kashmir there are villages which are in bad shape. They were always in bad shape but because of the calamity they have gone 10 years back," says Dr Jain.

There is also little institutional learning. "You will recall that there were pictures of CT scan machines under water in a hospital in Srinagar," says Dr Jain. "The new machines have been placed in the same place. When a flood happens next the machines will again be damaged."

"You cannot help it if there is a disaster. But you need to prepare yourself so as to minimise the damage," says Dr Jain. "In Kashmir, Uttarakhand and now Chennai there was wrong construction, which worsened the situation. It is important to recognise this and rectify it. It won't do to build in the same way again."

There is no formal disaster management training at the MBBS level. There should be a proper curriculum in MBBS and paramedical courses. Doctors For You provides training to government healthcare professionals. It can be basic stuff about saving a drowning patient and placing him/her in a recovery position, which is laterally with one leg bent and the other straight.

"We have customised our training. You can call it basic disaster life support. We look at the role of the doctor and the role of the paramedical staff. In a disaster scenario your resources are limited so it is important to understand triage, which is basically focussing your resources to get the maximum impact. If a patient has no chance of survival it is better to pay attention to those who can be saved. Or sometimes patients who are only minimally injured demand the most attention, but should be made to wait," explains Dr Jain. ■

Continued from page 7

## 'Online service delivery is a complete nightmare'

Secondly, who is responsible for not giving her pension for six months? What action has been taken against that person? He should be accountable. An accountability law like RTI is needed.

### What has been the response of the people?

It has been incredible. We just stand on a street corner — there are 100 of us and a bus — and 300-500 people gather very quickly. We hold a half-hour meeting where we ask four questions: how many of you would like us to fix a job chart for officials spelling out the work to be done or money will be deducted from his salary? How many of you think government officials should compulsorily send their children to government schools and hospitals? If they did would these services not be sorted out in a day? Should we have an accountability law? There is this surge of people who say, Absolutely, this is what we want.

### So this speaks of acute failure of governance on the ground.

The administration is just beginning to confront the fact that biometrics are not working. Banks are unable to cope. The Business Correspondents sitting in little shops are literally in a position to steal from people. They take thumb impressions twice for one transaction. They give the money for one and pocket it for the other. One week the thumb impression works, the next week it doesn't.

They are told, go to the bank. The bank says, bring two witnesses to verify a thumb impression. Old and disabled people hire transport to come to the bank. Online is a complete nightmare. People have six or seven cards: the Aadhaar card, the Jan Dhan card, job card, ration card, labour card.... Their cards come tumbling out and they say, we don't know what to do.

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) is neither direct nor of any benefit. The Pension Parishad fight in Rajasthan resulted in an increase in the number of people asking for pension from 14 lakh to 58 lakh. Money was increased from ₹300 to ₹500. We asked the government how many of its 58 lakh pensioners had moved to banks from post offices? They say it's about 45 lakh. How many have actually received this money in their hands? Their faces turn blank. If you don't know that, where is your delivery? People don't know into which account their money has gone and how many bank accounts they have because all kinds of accounts have been opened for them. ■



# Hospitals groan with patients

Jehangir Rashid  
Srinagar

WITH the rural healthcare system in a shambles in Kashmir, people are making a beeline for hospitals in Srinagar and Jammu, the two capital cities of the state. Facilities in rural areas are not only abysmal, they say, health centres are also located in far-flung places that are hard to reach. It's easier to just head to the city.

The result is that for even minor ailments thousands in the Valley turn up at tertiary care hospitals like the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh (SMHS) Hospital, the Sher-I-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) at Soura, the Government Lalla Ded Hospital, the Jhelum Valley College of Medical Sciences at Bemina, the Jawahar Lal Nehru Memorial Hospital at Rainawari and the Government Gousia Hospital in Khanyar.

"The state government has a wide network of hospitals and health institutions in the Valley. But in the real sense these health institutions are of no use since they have minimal facilities. Patients therefore shift to Srinagar hospitals. There are instances when patients ask the doctors to shift them to city-based hospitals," says Ali Mohammad, a resident of Daharmunah village in Budgam district.

The Government Lalla Ded Hospital, the main maternity hospital of the Kashmir Valley, remains abuzz throughout the year. With gynaecological consultation and subsequent surgery processes available at very few hospitals in Kashmir, most expectant mothers have no choice but to go to this hospital in Srinagar city.

"In what could be termed a disturbing trend, a majority of pregnant women are not willing to deliver their babies in a normal manner. Surgery or caesarian section is their preferred option. But such surgical procedures are available only in a handful of health institutions and the whole rush has to be borne by the Government Lalla Ded Hospital," says Ghulam Hassan, an employee of the health department.

In the Kashmir Valley, health institutions are looked after and monitored by two different departments. Hospitals like SMHS, Government Lalla Ded Hospital, Bone & Joint Hospital in Barzulla and Chest Diseases Hospital in Dalgate are looked after by the Health and Medical Education Department under the overall control of the Principal, Government Medical College, Srinagar.

Hospitals like JLN in Rainawari, Government Gousia Hospital in Khanyar and health institutions in rural and far-flung areas come under the purview of the Department of Health with the overall management by the Director, Health Services, Kashmir. Hospitals like SKIMS in Soura and JVC in Bemina are independent and governed by a board with the chief minister its chairman.

Some medical practitioners feel that visiting city-based hospitals has become a fad. They say there are patients who approach Srinagar hospitals even for ailments that can be easily treated at health institutions in their respective places.

"What is the fun of visiting the SMHS or SKIMS for treating a minor ailment like a headache or



Women flock to the SMHS hospital



People from rural areas at the Government Lalla Ded Hospital

stomachache? With physicians available at primary health centres, sub-district hospitals and district hospitals, these ailments can be easily treated at places the patients belong to. But still they visit Srinagar and spend a lot of money. This has to stop," says Zahoor Ahmad, a medical practitioner.

Thousands of patients visit the SMHS, SKIMS and JVC hospitals' outpatient departments (OPDs) daily. This leads to an unnecessary rush and the aim behind the establishment of these hospitals is also lost. The OPD doctors are exhausted at the end of the day.

"It is true that some people with minor ailments visit city hospitals, but there is another facet to this whole story. It has come to our notice that doctors working in hospitals at district or block level refer patients to Srinagar despite the fact that the patient can be treated there. Unnecessary referrals need to be stopped and the patient should be shifted to

Srinagar only in case of an emergency," points out Bashir Ahmad, a medico.

There are people who allege that upgradation of the existing health infrastructure and creation of a new one is done on political consideration. These people say that health institutions are upgraded or created only to paint a rosy picture with no improvement in facilities on the ground. They say that political intervention has to be stopped so that the health-care facilities are upgraded in a real sense with the common masses being the ultimate beneficiaries.

"We have a district hospital in Ganderbal. It is understaffed and facilities which should have been there are missing. As such, we are forced to visit hospitals in Srinagar city. I can understand that it leads to pressure on city hospitals, but we have no option," complains Wahid Ahmad, a resident of Theeru-Ganderbal. ■



Tanushree Gangopadhyay  
Ahmedabad

## Women take solar lights to the fields

FOR nearly two years, the mosque in a village in Kashmir would be enveloped in darkness when the sun dipped. It had no electricity. A woman equipped with the requisite training from the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) offered to light up the mosque with solar lights. But the men would not allow it. Lighting up the mosque is not a woman's job, they said.

After much persuasion, the maulvi reluctantly agreed. The woman arrived and briskly fixed solar lights. The mosque began to glow at night. The maulvi was impressed. He visited her home and gave her a cash award.

SEWA is helping its members in Kashmir, Gujarat and other states to assemble, repair, buy and sell solar lamps. Women are finding such lighting very useful, especially for agricultural work.

"In Kashmir we trained members of SEWA in assembling and repairing solar lights. Our work received an impetus ever since Farooq Abdullah became Union Minister of New and Renewable Energy. Today, 22 villages in Kashmir use solar lanterns in their homes. Women get micro-loans to finance solar lanterns," says Reema Nanavaty, Director of SEWA.

In 2008, SEWA carried out a survey to find out the economic status of its members. "We found our women spent 45 per cent of their income on fuel and energy for cooking. They walked long distances to collect water and firewood. So we started the Hariyali Green Energy programme with support from the International Finance Corporation (IFC). This is a synergy between energy and access to appropriate technology. The women have been given solar lanterns and solar cooking stoves," says Nanavaty.

The women are thrilled with their solar lanterns. Solar pumps are also doing well. But the solar stoves haven't been a success for many reasons.

Women in Surendranagar district of Gujarat assemble solar

lanterns of five watts each, says Heena Dave, coordinator of SEWA in Dhrangadhra. Each lantern costs ₹3,500.

Women in the flower business in Anand, Vadodara, Dholka and Ahmedabad, for instance, find solar lighting very useful. They begin work at 3 am. First, they pray and offer flowers to the gods. Then they go to their fields with their solar lanterns and pluck roses, marigolds, *neeli* and other flowers at that early hour. The air is filled with the fragrance of flowers as the women make their way to the *mandi*

with their solar lanterns lighting the way.

"Flowers are fresh at that time of the night. More important, we have to reach them to the markets by 6 am or they cannot be transported for sale," explains a woman flower plucker.

Spices such as cumin and cotton are also collected at that hour with solar lanterns. Cumin, an expensive spice, is easier to pluck at night when the air is cool. At lower temperatures the delicate flowers that contain pods of cumin tend to cluster together and can be quickly collected. During the day the pods separate and the cumin seeds get sprinkled in the mud.

Hansaben, a cumin collector, recalls her grandfather placing bedsheets near the cumin plants so that the pods and their seeds could be collected. "As children we collected each cumin pod painstakingly," she recalls.

Fields are watered at night with solar lighting. The women sometimes remove the bulb from the lantern and strap it on their foreheads. This leaves their hands free for plucking. The lights also keep animals away from the fields.

Several companies are making solar stoves but the women prefer their *chulhas* where they can make their *rotlas*. "If we pay ₹3,000 in instalments for solar stoves, we may as well spend ₹5,000 as a deposit for a Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) cylinder and stove," they say.

SEWA

The women also relate stories of disasters involving solar stoves. A teenager died when her solar stove burst, they say.

However, solar pumps have been very successful in the Little Rann of Kutch, says Nanavaty. Around 18,000 saltpan workers or *agariyas* who are members of SEWA manufacture salt. Families leave their villages and move to the Rann area in October and harvest the salt in June. Gauriben, a veteran saltpan worker, is very happy with her solar pump. Earlier, they used diesel pumps that required as much as 1,500 litres per day to lift water used for making salt.

"Today we save between 350 and 450 litres of diesel daily. We can now pay our instalments for the solar pump within five years," says Gauriben. ■



Flowers and spices are collected before dawn with solar lanterns

### SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR





*A heap of freshly harvested avocados ready to be packed and transported*

# HAIL THE DIVINE AVOCADO

## The fruit is a blessing in coffee land

**Shree Padre**  
Kasargod

**F**OR many years Veera Arasu thought the 800 avocado trees growing on his coffee plantation merely served a functional purpose. They were there to provide shade to his precious coffee shrubs. He had planted the avocado trees after drought struck his village, Thandikudi, in Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu, in 2002.

He grew oranges, too, which he sold to a wholesale merchant for a small profit. In 2014, he recalls, the merchant made him a surprising offer. He asked Arasu if he could buy his avocado fruit on a per tree basis like he did his oranges. Arasu figured ₹1,000 per tree would be a good price. There would be some negotiation surely, he thought. So he quoted ₹2,000 per tree.

To his surprise, the merchant agreed and Arasu

found himself ₹10 lakh richer. He shook his head in amazement. The merchant is going to lose all his money and return with a sob story, he thought. So he kept ₹5 lakh aside, thinking he would return it to the merchant when he came back to weep on his shoulder.

To Arasu's astonishment, the merchant returned smiling. He pressed another ₹5 lakh into Arasu's hands. "Sir, this is the profit I made from your avocado. Keep this money as an advance and sell your fruits to me next year too."

It took time for the 58-year-old Arasu to digest this. A veteran farmer, he is a consultant to 10 coffee estates and supervises some of them. He began calculating how much he could earn from avocado in the coming year.

"To earn the same income I will have to produce five tonnes of coffee," he told himself. "For that I would need at least 12 acres. Plus, I would need to invest in coffee plants, labour and managers."

He realised that avocado as an intercrop would be far more remunerative than coffee, his main crop. Around 40 avocado trees could be planted on an acre to provide shade. In four years the trees would bear fruit. Without much care or expense, a farmer could earn as much as ₹1,00,000 from avocado alone in an area famed for its aromatic Arabica coffee.

"I earned a windfall without any anticipation," he says. "Other farmers, I thought, could also earn more with just a little effort. So I began propagating avocado."

Pepper, hill banana, cotton and citrus fruits are also grown in Thandikudi. But now several farmers grow avocado for an income. Apart from Arasu, there is

Mohana Sundaram, Ravichandran, Sekhar Nagaraj and Shamugaraja. Nagaraj's Kodai nursery produces avocado grafts on an indent basis. He has imported avocado varieties too like the famous Hass.

Today, Kodaikanal in the lower Palani hills of Dindigul district has quietly notched a record. It earns a whopping ₹12 to 15 crore per year from avocado alone.

"There are about 12 lakh avocado trees here," says Dr M. Ananthan, former head of Thadiyankudisai Horticulture Research Station who promoted avocado in the Palani hills for nearly a decade. The station undertook nearly 100 campaign meetings in five years and released the TKD-1 variety, the only official avocado variety released throughout Asia.

"We guessed that avocado and pepper could thrive in this area," recalls Dr

SHREE PADRE



The fruit is transported in sacks

MUTHU STUDIO



Veera Arasu with avocados grown on his farm

Anantham. His efforts have borne fruit. Pepper has seen the highest price increase in the last two years. But the real winner has been avocado, the smooth butterfruit.

## EARLY ROOTS

In India, avocado is grown as a scattered crop, mainly in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Sikkim and the northeastern Himalayan belt. Assam and Himachal Pradesh also grow the fruit. But it is the three South Indian states that are the frontrunners. It is believed that the British introduced the fruit in Karnataka.

Avocado is buttery in texture and nutty in taste. That's why it is also called butterfruit. Perhaps because it isn't sweet, avocado didn't gain in popularity for a long time. The IT boom in Bengaluru changed its fortunes. Techies have a yen for the fruit. The city consumes the highest quantity of avocado in India. The fruit is relished in milkshakes.

Demand appears to outstrip supply. No avocado orchards have come up in India. It is categorised as a 'minor fruit' so it doesn't have a mandate for research. The tree is grown prolifically in Kodagu district as a shade tree for coffee or along fields, it isn't grown as a monocrop.

It was the late Alagar Swami who introduced butterfruit to the Palani hills. Swami, who was the MLA from the area, was a close relative of Mohana Sundaram, 64, a farmer in Thandikudi. "He is the father of avocado," says Sundaram. "He brought two avocado plants from Malaysia in 1965. Until then we knew nothing about this fruit."

In 1967 Swami quit politics and became a full-fledged farmer. His two trees began yielding fruit from 1971. Swami noticed that the yield was good and the fruit was tasty. He began distributing avocado seeds to whoever came to his home. "No visitor returned emptyhanded. He would give a few avocado seeds to everyone. At least 1,000 people must have planted those seeds since 1980," says Sundaram.

He says the two historic trees Swami brought from Malaysia fathered butterfruit trees in lower Palani.

Sundaram remembers every detail of those bygone years because he was deeply involved in championing avocado. Kodaikanal attracted tourists from all over India and Sundaram would sit near tea stalls with his small pile of avocado fruit and urge people to try it. "Come on, try this new fruit. I will tell you how to eat it," he would say and offer free samples. At that time avocado used to sell for 5-10 paise.

"In the initial two or three years I struggled a lot to make this fruit gain acceptance. Whenever I visited Madurai, I took a bagful of avocado. I would offer samples. Then I would try to sell the fruit. Nobody had heard of it. It wasn't a sweet fruit. I would offer the fruit to doctors. They didn't know of its health benefits. I had to explain a lot," he says.

By 1982, the price of butterfruit rose to 25 paise and then ₹1. In 1992 it began to sell by weight. Sundaram took the fruit to Calicut where he was surprised to find it selling for ₹30 per kg.

Today, a single avocado tree fetches him ₹5,000. Last year, Sundaram earned ₹23,000 from one tree. This is not only his highest, but possibly a record of sorts in avocado farming.

Another reason that led to the spread of avocado was drought. Lower Palani witnessed three successive drought years from 2002. The financial position of coffee estates worsened. To tide over the crisis, estate owners like Arasu began cutting and selling trees like silver oak.

But this felling proved detrimental. The upper canopy had protected coffee plants from the direct rays of the sun. With the canopy missing, coffee yields began to decline drastically.

Dr Parthiban, then head of the Thadiyankudisai Horticulture Research Station, suggested planting avocado, a fast-growing shade providing tree. It was a crisis management effort. Arasu planted 1,100 trees on his 30-acre coffee plantation. Only 800 survived.

**Kodaikanal in the lower Palani hills of Dindigul district has quietly notched a record. It earns a whopping ₹12 to 15 crore per year from avocado.**



## A hearty fruit

**AVOCADO** is a round, oval fruit, mostly green though brown and maroon varieties are also available. It has a large seed which is 30 per cent the weight of the fruit. Its inner flesh, when ripe, turns a light green.

Avocado is a very nutritive fruit. The pulp has four per cent protein and 30 per cent fat but it is low in carbohydrate. The fat is similar to olive oil in composition and widely used in the preparation of cosmetics. Avocados have high energy value of 245 calories per 100 gm.

The fruit is a reservoir of vitamins and minerals. It has Vitamin A, ascorbic acid, niacin, traces of riboflavin and thiamine along with sodium, calcium, magnesium, sulphur and chlorine. It also has traces of iron and copper.



Avocado pulp

Avocado has mainly monounsaturated fat, which is good fat. It reduces bad cholesterol and increases good cholesterol. In a 1996 study published in the *Journal Archives of Medical Research*, patients were provided food that included avocado for a week. Patients with mildly high cholesterol witnessed a 22 per cent decrease in bad cholesterol and triglycerides and an 11 per cent increase in good cholesterol. That is why avocado is often called 'friend of the heart'.

Avocado is mainly eaten fresh as a sandwich filling or in salads. It is also used in ice-creams and milkshakes. The pulp can be preserved by freezing. In India, we don't know much about the various ways in which avocado is used in Western countries.

Butterfruit ice-cream and milkshake are popular in Bengaluru. A new invention is avocado chapatti. Instead of water, butterfruit pulp is added to the wheat flour. Avocado face packs are popular in beauty parlours in South India. Abhilash Ghore, founder of [avocadoindia.com](http://avocadoindia.com), says he has developed a method of producing butterfruit pulp and will launch it soon.

"Now, after the success of avocado, many people congratulate me. But honestly, I didn't plant these trees with any hope of earning a good income from them," says Arasu.

Under his advice, around 1.5 lakh avocado plants have been planted. They will come to bearing in another two to three years.

## GROWN AT HEIGHTS

Butterfruit can be grown at between 600 and 2,500 metres above sea level. Thandikudi, for instance, is at 1,200 metres. Trees planted above 1,500 metres need direct sunshine. An annual rainfall of 700 to 1,500 mm and temperatures from 18 to 33°C are ideal. Red soil and forest soil with good organic content along with a pH of 5 to 6.5 are most suitable for the tree.

Farmers prefer seedlings for grafting. In India we have descendants of three varieties — from the West Indies, Guatemala and Mexico. Due to cross-pollination, more varieties are available.

Big butterfruits weigh between 200 and 400 gm. Some grow to 600 gm. The heaviest an avocado has grown here is 2.5 kg. Interestingly, avocado does not ripen on the tree. "This is a big plus point for the farmer. If there is a glut in the market, the farmer can leave his fruits on the tree for around a month," says Dr Ananthan.

It's also not easy for a rookie farmer to find out when the fruits have ripened. Generally, when the green colour begins to fade it's time to pluck the fruit.

Experienced farmers say if you wait for three weeks till the seed begins to rattle inside, you will lose 20 per cent of the fruit. The best avocados are for the table. The rest are sold to the cosmetics industry or to the processing sector.

## 2 CROPS A YEAR

In Tamil Nadu, butterfruit provides two crops a year. "No other area in the world is blessed with two crops of avocado," says Dr Ananthan. "Here avocado is available for eight months a year."

Each season lasts for four months with a fallow period of two months in between. In the lower Palani hills, the 'no crop' months are September-October and March-April. This means from May to August and from November to February, the fruit is available. But, depending on variety, altitude and climate, there are differences to this thumb rule.

The summer crop is more remunerative than the winter crop. Prices fluctuate, though. The average farm gate price is between ₹30 and 120 per kg. Big trees yield 200-250 kg of fruit per year. There are trees that yield half a tonne. Depending on spacing, around 70 trees can be planted on an acre in a coffee plantation. If spacing is wider, 40 trees can be grown.

Sundaram pioneered the growth of avocado and created a good market for it. In the 1990s he contacted fruit wholesalers at Kozhikode, Thrissur and Mumbai. These efforts created a good supply chain from lower Palani to the rest of India's consuming centres.

"For 200 days in a year, about ₹5-6 crore worth of butterfruit is sent every day from Oothu in Tamil Nadu to different cities. Outsiders don't know where the fruit is headed. What we do know is that demand is steadily rising," says Arasu.

SHREE PADRE



There is huge demand for avocado plants

SHREE PADRE



The trade is dominated by middlemen

Oothu, a small town nearby, is the nerve centre of the avocado trade. From here the fruit is sent to Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Thrissur, Kozhikode and other cities.

Sundaram even tried to find out if the fruit could be exported. But the buying agency wanted surety that farmers could supply the fruit all through the year. The elderly farmer couldn't give an answer. So, singlehandedly, he began a survey of three states. He visited Wayanad in Kerala, Kodagu in Karnataka and a few pockets in Tamil Nadu.

He concluded that avocado could be made available for 300 days a year. "For three months, from February to March, it is difficult to get butterfruit," he explains.

Unfortunately, he fell ill after his survey and had to shelve his idea of exporting avocado. "A thorough survey has to be done three times a year – when the tree flowers, as soon as the fruit sets and when the fruit grows a little. On the basis of such data we can renew our attempt at export," he says.

## MARKETS & PRICES

The good news for farmers is that the price of avocado is on an upward spiral. The downside is that middlemen dominate the trade.

Sundaram has 500 butterfruit trees. During last year's Pongal celebrations he sold a tonne of avocado at ₹120 per kg.

P.R.M. Ravichandran, another avocado farmer from Thandikudi, has 150 avocado trees growing amidst his coffee plants and orange trees. A few of his trees yield half a tonne. "Our farm gate price is ₹40 per kg on average. Most of my trees yield 300-350 kg per year. One tree fetches around ₹10,000 to 12,000. But then we get a good harvest on alternate years," he says.

The avocado market, like other fruit markets, is in the clutches of middlemen. Once the fruit sets they fix a 'per tree' price with the farmer. After the deal is clinched, the middlemen take the responsibility of harvesting and transporting the fruit.

The fruit is generally harvested with a bamboo stick attached to a hook with a sack at its tapered end. The harvested fruit is carelessly filled into sacks. Plastic crates, that could reduce damage during transport, are not being used. Like jackfruit, butterfruit trees have grown very large — making harvesting tougher. Pruning is not done.

However, rejuvenation of trees is possible. For this, the tree trunk is cut a couple of feet above the ground and selected shoots that emerge from the sides are permitted to grow. Sundaram has followed this practice on his small plot.

Hailstorm damage while the fruit is growing and untimely rain are major headaches for farmers. Pests like stem borer or diseases like anthracnose also strike avocado.

Tree trunks dry up due to lack of maintenance. Such trees can be rejuvenated by cutting their stem at the bottom and by providing good manure.

## HUGE POTENTIAL

"Butterfruit is a sunrise crop," remarks Dr Sharath V. Hiththalamani, retired Additional Director of Karnataka's Horticulture Department.

"Bengaluru city consumes an estimated 10,000 tonnes of avocado every year. We are seeing the first signs of butterfruit development. This is just the beginning," he says.

Other cities lag behind in avocado consumption. "In Bengaluru this fruit is available all 12 months. The city has about 5,000 juice shops. Each keeps 10 kg of avocado in stock. They charge ₹60-80 for a glass of avocado milkshake. It is the costliest one on their menu," says Dr Hiththalamani. "Bengalureans aren't eating avocado. They are drinking it."

The high price of avocado isn't a bubble. "Just look at the increase in fruit eating after the IT boom. Expensive imported fruits are available even in small towns," says Arasu. "Demand for avocado is rising without any advertising. In Tamil Nadu, after the sale of lottery tickets was banned, lottery shops became fruit shops. As more consumers become health-conscious and opt for natural foods, demand will rise."

## AVOCADO STUDIES

The Central Horticulture Experiment Station (CHES), Chettalli, a sub-centre of the IIHR (Indian Institute of Horticulture Research) in Bengaluru, has also been getting farmers interested in avocado. In May last year CHES organised a brainstorming session on the avocado with farmers.

Arasu's claim that he earns ₹8 to 10 lakh from butterfruit without any great effort has made farmers in Kodagu sit up and take note. A few study teams visited Thandikudi and its adjacent areas to see things firsthand.

Says Shivakumar, a Kodagu farmer who has gone on two study trips to Thandikudi: "Many Kodagu farmers are inspired. Demand for avocado grafts has increased. Some farmers are discussing the prospect of planting thousands



The avocado fruit ready for harvesting

**Bengaluru is the biggest consumer of avocado in India. Avocado milkshake is a bestseller. People in the city aren't eating avocado. They are drinking it.**

of avocado trees with me."

Dr Senthil Kumar, Head of CHES, says his station can produce only seedlings of avocado. "This year we produced 4,000 seedlings. But the demand is three-fold," he says.

Times have really changed for avocado. Sundaram recalls the old days when, like Swami, he would give seeds for free to farmers and some of them would quietly throw them away outside his gate.

Thimmegouda, a farmer near Bidadi near Bengaluru, has planted 1,500 avocado grafts as a monocrop. This is, in all probability, India's first avocado plantation. He says he might intercrop the fruit with lime at a later stage.

Dr. Hiththalamani has been helping farmers keen to plant avocado. "There are many farmers around Bengaluru who have planted 50 or 100 trees. If you include Tumkur district, the newly planted butterfruit plants might be covering a total of 700 acres."

This year, Arasu harvested his own avocado and fixed a farm gate price of ₹40 and spread the word. His experiment was a success. "When I didn't harvest my crop I got ₹30 per kg. This year, hailstorms damaged my crop considerably. We got only about 200 kg from 200 trees. At an average price of ₹35 per kg for 200 trees, I earned ₹14 lakh."

Arasu too feels prices will not decrease because demand is increasing. "None of us knows which variety is good. We are our own scientists," he quips.

Abhilash Ghore, a butterfruit lover from Pune, and his friends have formed an All India Avocado Producers Association. They have also launched [avocadoindia.com](http://avocadoindia.com) to create awareness about the fruit. He plans to spread good farming practices and develop a market for avocado.

"It is a very healthy fruit. But people don't know about its health benefits or how to eat it. I want to start a campaign — 'Eat half an avocado every day.'"

Ghore points out the shortcomings in farming and marketing. "Most of the fruits fall down while harvesting. Using bags for transport damages the fruit further. In the list of high value crops, avocado occupies the 10th place. If we can improve farming practices and develop quality consciousness in harvesting and transport, avocado can become India's second or third high-value crop," he says hopefully. ■

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# BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

## Multix gets rural thumbs up

### It's a car, van and genset rolled into one

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**G**ANESH Narayan Chaudhry is a farmer in Mahapura village of Jaipur district in Rajasthan. His is an even-paced rural existence where few things change. He grows his fruits and vegetables and makes his usual trips to the *mandi* where he sells to traders. A lot of time goes in tending to his fields. With 10 acres he is reasonably well-off but not rich. In his 40 years he has learnt the virtues of living within his means and not splurging on new possessions.

But when a dealer for the Multix, a personal utility vehicle, turned up last year, Ganesh Narayan was hooked. He kept the vehicle for seven or eight days to do trial runs, but he knew right away that this was what he needed.

The Multix instantly meant many things to him. It could be used as a small car in which he and his wife and two children could travel. On *mandi* days, it was perfect for transporting fruits and vegetables. He could take it into his fields because it was rugged and could cope with varying terrain. And, if the need arose, he could also use the Multix as a generator to power his home or run a pump set. At around ₹2.32 lakh, its price was just right.

The ease with which Ganesh Narayan made his decision has much to do with the humungous amount of homework that has gone into designing and pricing the Multix. Unknown to him, his needs and preferences had been closely mapped for more than a year by Polaris as it conceived a vehicle for launching in rural India.

Polaris is a global company with more than one avatar. It is better known in India for IT consulting and software. But it is also a manufacturer of high-end all-terrain vehicles and its Ranger is popular for recreational purposes. Polaris brought its vehicle business to India in 2011 with completely knocked down kits. Simultaneously, it began researching the demand for a cheaper rural vehicle, which would give the company a sizable presence in India.

The Multix was conceptualised and designed after engaging with customers in rural areas across the country. Once Polaris was sure of its product, it looked for an Indian partner and collaboration with Eicher followed in a 50-50 venture, Eicher Polaris Pvt Ltd.

The Multix, which is made at Eicher's plant in Jaipur in Rajasthan, was launched in August. The target is to sell 3,000 vehicles in 2016.

Ganesh Narayan, who was the first customer,



PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

Sohan Lal Sharma, a dairy owner, with his family and their Multix at Bhambhori village

**'The ideas which came in sounded impossible to fulfil. People were asking for fuel efficiency equal to a motorcycle, a vehicle which could travel on-road and go off-road, and add-ons like a generator,' says Dubey.**

says: "The dealer came to our village. He took us to the plant where it was manufactured. We tried out the vehicle for eight to 10 days. I liked it. I use it for transporting my fruits and vegetables to the *mandi* and to carry manure to my fields. I also go on trips with my family."

Sohan Lal Sharma, who owns a dairy in Bhambhori village, has also bought a Multix. "I was looking for a small van to move around in and to carry my milk cans and fodder for my cows. A friend suggested the Multix. The van and the Multix cost the same but the Multix is any day better. I can convert it myself from a pick-up van into a family car."

What makes him even happier is that the Multix costs very little to run. It comes in two models:

Multix AM and Multix MX and its price starts from ₹2.32 lakh and goes up to ₹2.72 lakh.

Shiv Shankar Chaudhry, a farmer in Chouru village of Phage *tehsil*, says he learned about the vehicle through the Internet. What attracted him was its solid suspension that could handle bumpy rural roads. "That is correct. I use it to go to my fields, transport my crops and visit my relatives with my family. The Multix is giving me mileage of 28-30 km a litre," he says.

In India, Polaris gave itself the goal of combining the aspirations of rural consumers with the technological strengths of the company.

"We did workshops in Ludhiana, Jhansi, Gorakhpur and remote places in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. We tried to understand the kind



*The Multix is produced at the company's state-of-the-art factory in Jaipur*

of vehicle farmers who were using tractors, transporters, small business persons and bikers would like to have," says Pankaj Dubey, managing director of Polaris India Pvt Ltd. The research, he says, was done independently and Polaris watched from behind the scenes.

"The ideas which came in sounded impossible to fulfil for a company entering the Indian market. People were asking for fuel efficiency equal to a motorcycle, a vehicle which could travel on-road and go off-road, and add-ons like a generator," says Dubey.

The rural consumer seemed to be asking for the moon. "Basically, they were asking us for a non-existent product. We thought, why not use Polaris' off-road strength to create an on-road vehicle?" says Dubey.

Cost was a factor. Their potential customers were honest people who would repay their loans but they did not have documentation or deep pockets.

When Polaris found Eicher, the latter was working on a similar product. While Polaris brought its solid technology to the table, Eicher's strength was its manufacturing expertise, supply chain, dealer network and good reputation. Its service in rural areas is considered one of the best. The two got into a 50:50 joint venture.

They decided to design a rugged vehicle with strong tyres and shock absorbers that could navigate rough rural roads. "People almost always overload their vehicles. Our vehicle ensures that farm



*Pankaj Dubey, managing director of Polaris India, with the vehicle in Jaipur*



*Farmers can take the Multix to their fields*

,produce like bananas doesn't get ruined on bad roads with potholes," says Dubey.

Siddhartha Lal, managing director of Eicher, says that the two companies identified the 'Independent Indian Businessman' as an untapped segment of about 58 million customers with "specific needs and issues that were not being met through existing vehicles in the market".

"When we started work on the Multix, we were certain that we didn't want to follow any archetype

of an existing vehicle. Two-wheelers, cars, trucks, they are all western concepts, which have now been made adaptable for India. What we wanted to do, and have done, is that we've started ground-up. We have looked at the customer first," says Lal, under whose leadership Eicher has experienced great success as a manufacturer of light commercial vehicles and the iconic Bullet motorcycle.

"The Multix is India's first Personal Utility Vehicle (PUV). We aim to popularise the Multix, grow this customer segment and get scale to create a conducive and progressive ecosystem for independent businessmen to unlock their potential."

The Multix has a 510 cc diesel engine, mileage of 29 km to a litre of diesel and meets Euro 3 emission norms. It is a four-wheel drive vehicle. The AX version can seat five people and there is storage capacity at the back. The MX version has a rear area for goods and a cabin for seating people. The vehicle is low on maintenance costs.

"We worked it out like this: the customer buys a motorcycle for ₹50,000, then he buys a generator for another ₹50,000. He also has to either buy or hire a commercial vehicle to transport his goods. That still doesn't take care of his family's transport needs. So we reached a sweet spot with this price," says Dubey.

The Multix is manufactured at the company's state-of-the-art factory located in Jaipur. Vehicles have started rolling out. They have 30 dealers in UP, Rajasthan, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh.

"Our objective is to reach rural areas first," says Dubey. "Then, peri-urban areas. Areas which have a power shortage and poor infrastructure are the ones most likely to buy the Multix."

B.C. Nitharwat, a Multix dealer in Jaipur, is a busy man on the verge of selling his 100th Multix. "We are getting a very good response from customers," he says. "People are buying it for various reasons."

Two carpenters bought it for power generation, says Nitharwat. "One is running four machines through the Multix. He had approached a bank for a loan but within 15 days he paid me half the money, saying he had recovered its cost, and he will pay the rest soon," says Nitharwat.

A sweetshop-owner bought it for his catering business. A manufacturer of solar panels bought it to transport his panels safely. Until he bought the Multix, a few of his solar panels would invariably get damaged during transportation.

The company is relying on word of mouth for marketing the Multix and it seems to be working. "The idea is to give potential customers firsthand experience of the vehicle. Otherwise, people disbelieve our claims. People ride it, use it and spread the word. So our advertising costs are minimal," says Dubey.

Nitharwat seconds Dubey's opinion. "The best part of being a Multix dealer is the support we get from the company. We organise a three-day camp in the villages to give a demo of the Multix. On the third day, people from the factory join us. Our customers are our brand ambassadors. They recommend it to their friends and relatives and are even ready to clear any doubts. They feel kind of proud when somebody buys the vehicle because of their recommendation," says Nitharwat.

For city roads, Nitharwat recommends a few alterations: more comfortable seats, and a very silent engine. But Dubey is clear: the Multix has been designed for rural India and that is his absolute focus for now. ■

# ‘Our focus will be on using tech for large-scale impact’

**Civil Society News**  
New Delhi

THE NASSCOM Foundation has been working with companies, government and voluntary organisations to develop corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts that efficiently address development concerns. A CSR Leadership Conference is being held by the Foundation on 2 February in Bengaluru and on 9 March in Delhi to bring together various stakeholders to share learning, set goals and engage on issues and challenges. The first conference of this kind was held last year. *Civil Society* put questions to Shrikant Sinha, CEO of the NASSCOM Foundation, on the ground the conference expects to cover. Edited excerpts:

**What does your conference hope to achieve?**

The CSR Leadership Conference (CLC) was initiated by the NASSCOM Foundation in 2015 as a platform to engage with CSR leaders, civil society members and policymakers.

The CSR Leadership Conference 2016 (#NFCLC16) is trying to find answers to the most relevant questions on ‘Can the IT-BPM industry CSR innovate for the underserved?’ and ‘How can CSR meaningfully address the India development agenda?’ The conference will bring together CSR leaders, ‘Technology for Good’ champions, grassroots NGO practitioners and public policy leaders to discuss solutions for the greatest challenges facing development and poverty alleviation in India while calling for actions leading the way to meaningful CSR across corporate India.

**Combining innovation with technology is a clear focus. What is the IT industry’s record in this regard? What are the best examples you would like to cite?**

As part of the CSR Leadership Conference, the Bengaluru event will be completely focused on how we can use technology to bring about large scale-social impact (#Tech4Good). Since the last eight years, the NASSCOM Foundation’s NASSCOM Social Innovation Forum (NSIF) has been instrumental in identifying, recognising and mentoring early adopters of technologies in the social space, giving scale, market accessibility and sustainability to a number of social innovations. The forum has helped non-profits, corporates, individuals and many aspiring social entrepreneurs by empowering them and helping them to scale and augment impact.

This year the forum, with the theme, ‘Making technologies work for the underserved’, will showcase technology-based solutions that address India’s

development challenges in education, skills and employability, health, accessibility and livelihood.

The forum will discuss and debate how CSR can help scale innovative impact models, led by various social impact vehicles, including social enterprises and not-for-profit organisations. The forum will examine whether technology can play a role in scaling initiatives designed for the poor and underserved. Some of the innovations are:

SkillTrain, which is a social enterprise that lever-



*Shrikant Sinha: ‘We will discuss how we can scale innovative impact models’*

ages mobile technology to deliver quality vocational training to rural youth by uploading small videos into a basic Sim card and making them available through retail outlets at negligible costs.

CoBELs or Competency Based Experiential Learning Solution is an e-learning solution that maps curriculum into games and activities.

ReMeDi or Neurosynaptic conditioned telemedicine technology, which works even in extremely poor settings.

An IVRS-based Daily Monitoring System is a process innovation through which realtime, grassroots-level data on midday meal schemes is collected systematically every day from over 150,000 schools spread throughout Uttar Pradesh.

Among CSR applications for Technology for Good is the Target Corporation’s ‘Library Software’ that is deployed in schools for underprivileged children. The software allows the schools to maintain records and track books in a structured manner.

Accenture works in partnership with many NGOs to use technology to impart life skills to disadvantaged youth, such as retail skills and basic oral English. They have also developed an e-learning platform for easy access to learning material.

HP operates HP Life Future classrooms to impart

basic digital literacy as well as entrepreneurship skills through repurposed shipping containers parked within underserved communities across India.

Cisco is using CEED Technology to provide high quality virtual classroom lessons to remote ITIs across multiple states in India.

**Are there problem areas with regard to CSR policy, which you expect to address at the conference? Are there challenges which IT companies are facing?**

Some of the potent questions that the conference will try and find solutions to are: How to create CSR policy and what should be included/excluded; how do foreign companies with an Indian subsidiary calculate their two per cent profit share and report back; whether the unspent money can be carried forward as corpus; should companies form their own foundations or work with existing NGOs; what are the auditing and compliance requirements and tax exemptions on CSR expenses; how can volunteering be monetised and brought into the ambit of CSR; how to account for hardware and software donations under the CSR rule.

Designing and implementing a viable CSR strategy is of utmost importance and will be a key topic of discussion wherein successful CSR leaders will share best practices towards creating an impactful and sustainable CSR initiative which falls under the ambit of the CSR law.

**Partnerships are valuable. How does the NASSCOM Foundation facilitate the bringing together of government, social sector entities and companies?**

The NASSCOM Foundation enjoys unique positioning with its access to decision-makers in the government, the leadership from across industry and partnership with a vast network of over 4,000 non-profits. The foundation, therefore, can act as a joining force, bridging the gap between these three fundamental development agents of society.

An example of this can be seen in the NASSCOM Foundation’s programme of the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) which was started by the Foundation in 2011 and was adopted by the Government of India in 2014 to later make it a part of the Digital India movement.

The foundation has also taken up the responsibility of training 10 per cent of underserved citizens in the first phase of NDLM and has partnered with corporations like Amdocs, Ericsson, Atos, EXL, Mercer, Cybage, Persistent, Zensar, HP, SAP, Infracore, Hitachi, Cyient, Infosys, Capgemini, Wells Fargo, Cognizant, Mothercare and Sears to support the programme by creating and funding NDLM centres across India while on-ground training is provided by the NGOs who sign up as implementation partners for the programme. ■

*To register and know more about the Conference, please log on to [www.clc.nasscomfoundation.org](http://www.clc.nasscomfoundation.org).*



# INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

## Empower teachers with tech



DILEEP RANJEKAR

### BACK TO SCHOOL

AROUND 2000, one of the biggest challenges facing the Indian school education system was the large number of “out of school” children. The estimates of the number ranged from 39 to 59 million. The Public Report on Basic Education in India offered a decent analysis of reasons for children not attending school. When the Azim Premji Foundation began its work, the initial agenda revolved around enrolment, attendance and learning. In fact, our first two large programmes were entirely focussed on enrolment of “out of school children”.

While working on the ground, we interacted with various stakeholders including teachers, education functionaries and parents. When we asked hundreds of parents about their aspirations for their children, we found three common strands: (a) children must know English (b) they should be able to work on computers and (c) they should qualify to work in the IT sector (which was thriving at that point of time).

One of the ideas we decided to try out to enhance enrolment was to find out how children would respond if we placed computers in a government school. A pilot project followed in 35 identified schools. We soon realised that computers in schools had no meaning without digital learning resources that dealt with what children were supposed to learn. At less than 2 per cent reach, the Internet was almost non-existent, therefore, use of a medium like compact discs to reach content became necessary. With some experience, we launched a major project (probably the largest in the country) to develop digital learning resources that dealt with the curriculum for children from Classes 3 to 8.

Our strategy and direction were guided by a national three-day workshop that included education secretaries and State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) directors from 20 states, senior representatives from multilateral agencies (UNDP, USAID and UNICEF), technology academicians and a few NGOs that had some experience in technology in education. The deliberations of this workshop followed two rounds of concerted meetings with about 80 teachers across four states. The questions discussed with these teachers were (a) what did they find difficult to teach (b) what were the building blocks in learning in various

subjects (c) what did children normally find difficult to learn, and (d) what part of teaching-learning was more amenable to being done through the medium of technology.

For us, it was not about technology but about providing an alternative pedagogic experience of learning for children — an experience that was interactive, joyful and self-paced. It was not easy at all. Developing each module was like developing a movie — it had a theme, a story, a script, dialogues, characters, songs, dance and music. Converting a pedagogical idea into a successful digital interaction

- In over 59 per cent of schools the computers were either very poorly used (6 per cent) or not used at all (53 per cent). The key culprits were absence of electricity plus infrastructural and maintenance inadequacy.

- The teachers were fairly detached from what the children were doing with the digital learning resources on the computer.

- The presence of active computers had some positive impact on attendance and in stray cases on enrolment (in some cases children shifted from private to government schools that had digital learning resources).

LAKSHMAN ANAND



*Technology in the classroom must be first deployed by the teacher for effective results*

with the children that contributed to enhancement of learning was a big challenge. With our determination and focus, by 2007 we were the largest developers of digital learning resources in 18 languages (out of which four were tribal languages).

We never urged any state government to buy or introduce computers in schools. We provided digital learning resources free to all government schools and many not-for-profit schools that already had computers. Eventually, our digital learning resources reached over 3.5 million children across 18 states. The child had an option to choose one of three languages — English, Hindi or the local language.

Like all our other work, this was action research and it was important to know the impact of the deployment of digital learning resources by the states. An independent research study across four states revealed that the deployment hardly impacted the learning levels. The critical reasons were:

By that time, we also had more insights into the various priorities in education and we almost decided to stop the programme of digital learning resources. However, it was strongly felt that we must understand the issue of effective use of technology in education. Further intense research followed in two states for a period of three years. The important findings were:

- The decision to use technology as a part of the teaching-learning strategy in the classroom must be that of the teacher who must be fully familiar/competent with the technology she uses.

- Only if such a teacher deploys technology in an appropriate manner and as an integral part of her pedagogy can it significantly contribute to enhanced learning.

- All infrastructure challenges ought to be overcome before we deploy technology in schools.

I am amazed when well-placed and educated

*Continued on page 26*

# A forest in limbo



KANCHI KOHLI

**I**N mid-December, the international environmental discourse was bustling with analyses of the good and the bad of the Paris climate summit. Questions were being raised on what would bind countries to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and whether it was realistic to expect the world to wean itself from fossil fuels in the near future.

At the same time, a small but strong group of forest-dwellers in central India were neck-deep in demanding legal compliance to, once again, protect their lives, livelihoods and homes from the impacts of a coal mine.

A legal challenge and subsequent judgment of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in March 2014 had brought to light that a joint-venture coal mining operation in Sarguja district of Chhattisgarh had been granted approval, based on an inadequate appraisal. The Hasdeo Arand forests, where this mine was located, had once been considered a 'no-go' area for coal mining because of its forest density and rich wildlife.

The NGT judgment records that "there was no comment or a specialist view of the Wildlife Management Plan forthcoming....", before a decision was taken. It concluded that many other facts had not been adequately appraised by India's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC). Therefore, said the NGT, their decision required a review. In this re-examination process, the FAC, amongst other things, has to clearly ascertain whether the coal block area encompasses the migratory route or corridor of any wild animal and, in particular, elephants.

The FAC's decision is a necessary step before the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) can either approve or reject a

proposal for diversion of forest land for non-forest uses such as mining, roads, industries, dams and so on.

In the present case, 1,898.328 ha of Hasdeo Arand forests in Sarguja had been earmarked for setting up the 10 MTPA Parsa East Ketan Besan coal mine. In March 2014, the NGT questioned the adequacy of this approval, directed a stay on the mining operations, and a review of the decision.

Soon after the NGT's directions, the project authorities approached the Supreme Court (SC), where the stay on the mining operation was revoked. However, the SC allowed for continuation



The Hasdeo Arand forests in Sarguja

of mining and transportation of the ore only "till further orders are passed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests". What this meant was that the SC had not in any way held back the FAC and MoEFCC from reconsidering their decision, which is mandatory as part of their judgment.

But did this happen? This was the question that members of the Hasdeo Arand Bachao Sangharsh Samiti (HABSS) and the Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan (Save Chhattisgarh Movement) tried to ascertain from the environment ministry. In October 2015, they received a response to a Right to Information (RTI) application filed seven months earlier in January, saying that no action had been taken since the matter was subjective.

stand last-mile issues as well as the cost and quality of such an Internet connection for the school — when the total teaching-learning material budget per teacher per year is just ₹500 per annum (less than \$10).

Being an extensive user of technology, having spent 70 per cent of my working life with a technology organisation and having been a part of the largest technology intervention in India, I would be the last person to fight technology just for fighting's sake. I do believe that technology could have a powerful role in reaching out to the seven to eight million teachers in our country and in making it an integral part of

The RTI response also included minutes of an FAC meeting held in April 2014 when a detailed agenda note was put forth and it had been concluded that the case "may be submitted before FAC for consideration". After this nothing seems to have happened except that business as usual has worked in favour of the mining operations. This, despite the fact that the SC and the NGT both appear to be awaiting a response from the MoEFCC and the FAC.

In mid-December, Alok Shukla, one of the conveners of the CBA, wrote to the Chairperson of the FAC and forwarded copies of the letter to other rel-

evant officers, asking that this lacuna be addressed. The letter simply points to the orders of the NGT and the SC and raises the issue that the SC has not stayed the process of the FAC having to reexamine its decision. In fact, the SC has allowed the mining operations to proceed until further orders from the MoEFCC. The letter also demands compliance for the NGT's orders and a thorough examination of the issues by the FAC.

No answer, action or response has been forthcoming till the time of writing this. For all of us, the above story remains a crucial reminder of how decisions around forests continue to be taken in India. State and national capitals, expert meetings and judicial directions all remain far away from the people living around the PEKB mine. Yet they determine the present and future of many similar contexts

across the country.

This is not just a legal story. It is a story of how what we call home, what is everyday life, and how food is cultivated and gathered can just simply be "written off" one day. Someone far away with complete detachment from villages and forests can choose to sign off many futures. Where there is some luck, a mere notice might come their way. But where there is little hope, the ministry might actually get their act together following your appeal! Either way, the decision-making ecosystem of how and for what purposes forest areas like Hasdeo should be opened up, remains an unresolved challenge. ■

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people often blindly offer technology as a solution to enhance the quality of education and also ignore some fundamental issues like teacher education, enhancing the competence of existing teachers, addressing several infrastructure issues that affect both equity and security and the ground realities in the distant corners of our country.

For the past 15 years, I have been hearing that Internet connections would not be a problem at all and some Internet service providers have majorly invested in reaching the Internet. They don't under-

teacher education — so that they choose the right technology to improve the quality of education in their classroom. Technology can also develop a culture of responsiveness as well as of exploring the vast knowledge bank that exists through the Internet.

But positioning technology as a priority above some fundamental issues like teacher competence, school leadership development, health and nutrition of our children and equitable infrastructure in our schools (including functional toilets and clean drinking water) is surely problematic. ■

*Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation.*

# Learn from China



RAJIV KUMAR

CHINA sneezes and the world catches a cold. And shivers. This is a new world. Global markets did not wait for the extraordinary positive employment data from the US economy, which added nearly 300,000 new jobs in December.

They were left unimpressed with the US Fed raising interest rates for the first time since 2009. They have been skittish about the net effect of the steepest decline in global oil prices with Brent currently selling at less than \$35 per barrel compared to \$120 per barrel less than a year ago.

But markets sank and shuddered when the Chinese manufacturing sector growth tanked and the Shanghai market lost more than 7 per cent on two days within a week. China and not the US or Europe and certainly not Japan is now the epicentre of the global economy.

China overtook the US as the world's largest economy in purchasing power parity terms in December 2014.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Chinese economy was \$17.6 trillion in December 2014 compared to the US at \$17.4 trillion. With the Chinese population at 1.36 billion and the US at 320 million and the large differential in GDP growth rates over the past three decades, this was bound to happen. But it has happened sooner than expected. In the process, the Chinese have managed to lift more than 300 million people out of abject poverty. Who would have imagined such an outcome in 1979 when Deng Xiaoping took the first tentative steps to establish a 'socialist market economy' in China.

China is once again the middle kingdom!

There are some important lessons for us in India from the mighty rise of the once sleeping dragon.

First, India can also rise to the top. Human history is replete with examples of tables being turned. The US losing its status as the world's largest economy since 1871 to China is only one such example. India was ranked first until the end of the 18th century and China until 1861.

Second, we must get our act together and work collectively to serve the national cause or else we

will be left far behind. In 1980, the Indian and Chinese per capita incomes were equal. Today, an average Chinese earns five times (490 per cent) more than the *aam aadmi* in India in nominal US dollars. According to the IMF, the Chinese per capita annual income in 2015 was \$8,280 compared to India's at \$1,688. It is time we stopped deluding ourselves about being a world power. Yes, we get some brownie points for being an open democracy but we can hardly claim global attention with our dehumanising rural poverty and urban squalor.

Third, being left too far behind poses a real security threat because we will increasingly be unable to defend our interests in the neighbourhood and not keep up with the rising Chinese hard power. Deep pockets wield considerable influence and are quite clearly beginning to do so in South Asia and Africa to our detriment.



India must focus on creating jobs

Fourth, Prime Minister Narendra Modi would do well to follow Deng's advice. We should not hasten to seek global roles and responsibilities but instead focus laser-like on achieving a double-digit growth rate. Hard power is a necessary condition for seeking a global role and also for eliminating poverty.

Fifth, emulating the Chinese, we should also focus exclusively on generating the 12 million jobs that we need to put our young population to productive use. Modi would do well to jettison all other goals and priorities and focus only on employment generation. Unfortunately, we do not even have reliable data on employment. This is completely unacceptable.

Finally, in pursuing its goal of rapid employment generation, China suppressed its national ego and invited its aggressors and deserters to invest in China to generate the much-needed jobs. Japanese, Taiwanese and American companies were at the forefront of massive FDI inflows that saw Chinese

special economic zones provide millions of new jobs to Chinese peasants. But we continue to play hot and cold with FDI. The ghost of the East India Company is continually resurrected by vested interests to thwart FDI that will help in accelerating employment generation. FDI in retail trade, agriculture, media, legal services and all other sectors is good as long as it generates new jobs and exports.

The Chinese economy has now entered a structural and transitional downturn. Important structural factors pulling down Chinese growth rates are over-indebtedness; excess capacities in real estate and manufacturing; and steeply rising wages. China is also caught in the middle of its transition from over-reliance on investment and export demand to relying more on domestic consumption demand. This can be a prolonged and tough transition.

India should take advantage of this weakening of the Chinese growth momentum. We should ramp up our exports to take the share in world markets being vacated by Chinese companies.

Instead, our Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, Nirmala Sitharaman (speaking to apex industry chambers on 8 December, 2015) has been lamenting the depreciating yuan and Chinese excess capacities that will propel exports into India. She is perhaps preparing for greater import protection for our industries like steel and light engineering that are facing poor demand and rising Chinese imports. This is a lose-lose policy. It will neither help generate jobs nor make our firms globally competitive.

It would have been far better if the minister had taken this opportunity to explain

why Indian exports have been declining continually for the past 12 months. She should have elaborated on policy measures that her ministry has prepared to reverse this unacceptable decline in exports that will not even touch \$300 billion for 2014-15 compared to \$310 billion in 2012-13 and \$1.2 trillion of Chinese exports in 2013.

I sincerely hope that Arvind Subramaniam and Arvind Panagariya, whom she is reportedly planning to meet in the near future, will advise her to learn from the Chinese and prepare a strategy for increasing India's share in world markets by using export-oriented FDI and employing our surplus labour. That would be the right approach towards generating much-needed jobs and reducing poverty. Being protective and defensive may seem like a good short-term palliative for the beleaguered Indian industry but will lead India up a blind alley. ■

*Rajiv Kumar is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, and Founder-Director of Pahlle India Foundation*

# Social sector needs money

BHARAT DOGRA

**T**HERE has been a serious decline in funding of the social sector and this is having a deleterious effect in villages at a time of drought and acute rural distress.

The social sector includes women and child development, nutrition, health, education, panchayati raj, special provisions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, for Other Backward Classes and minorities, aspects of agriculture, water and sanitation as well as poverty alleviation and employment programmes.

Health, education and nutrition are substantially underfunded in India. Health gets just 1.2 per cent of GDP. There is a crying need for an allocation closer to 5 per cent. The UPA did promise to increase spending on health but did not do so. The NDA seems even less inclined to allocate more to health.

At one time the Twelfth Plan (2012-17) was supposed to be the period for a rise in the health budget, but this was not visible in the Plan draft. Second, one doesn't even know where the Plan is, since the Planning Commission is now dead.

So the shortage of adequate resources existed even before the present crisis emerged about a year earlier in three parts.

The Budget Estimates (BEs) for financial year 2014-15 for the social sector were cut midway, as is evident from the Revised Estimates (REs) for this financial year.

In the Union Budget of 2015-16, allocations for the social sector were cut drastically on the plea that they would be made up in the state budgets since they were being provided additional resources according to the recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission. This, the Union government argued, would actually improve social sector spending as funds would be available in a more decentralised way, keeping in view local needs.

But this optimism of the Union Finance Ministry was not justified as the cuts made in the Union Budget were not made up by adequate hikes in the state budgets. The situation differs from state to state, but overall there is a reduction in the resources available for the social sector at the national level.

The effect of this deprivation is visible at field level. On recent visits to villages I found several women and children deprived of ICDS nutrition, students deprived of stipends and old persons deprived of pensions.

There is deterioration in healthcare delivery, shortage of medicines in government hospitals and cut-backs in midday meals at several places. Employment works to reduce the distress caused by drought and scarcity were negligible.

Were adequate additional funds really transferred to the state governments? Did the state governments utilise the extra funds for priority social sector spending? What was the overall impact of adequate availability of funds to the social sector?

First, some observers say that the transfers to



Midday meal in a government school

**Health, education and nutrition are underfunded in India. Health gets just 1.2 per cent of GDP. There is a crying need for an allocation closer to 5 per cent.**

states may not be adequate to make up for the Union government's cuts. The Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) says in its analysis of the Union Budget 2015-16: "It appears that the transfer of social sector responsibilities to the state governments is not going to be matched by an adequate increase in their spending capacity."

Explaining this in greater detail, the CBGA says, "Contrary to what has been the common perception about the implications of the 14th Finance Commission recommendations, the net increase in the spending capacity of the State Governments (resulting from the changes being introduced in Centre-State sharing of resources) in 2015-16 would be very modest."

But have state governments made the best use of the modest funds that were available to them? Suvrat Das, Director of CBGA, says, "It would be wrong to blame the Central government for everything. In some cases, the state governments have also been less than careful about using the available resources carefully to maintain and improve important social sector spending."

A complete and updated picture of social sector allocations covering the entire country following the cuts made in the Union Budget in 2015-16 is not

available yet. Generally, official data is released quite late and by then a lot of damage has already been done. What we know is that some social sector ministries have been in turmoil, with senior officials and even ministers uncertain and anxious about how the cuts in social sector spending will be made up and when.

The Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, said in October that the main programme for child nutrition has been badly affected by budget cuts, making it difficult to pay wages of health and nutrition workers.

In last year's Union Budget, when the fund allocation for health, nutrition, child and women welfare was reduced drastically, Gandhi had criticised this cruel cut then too. She had said that she would be approaching the Union Finance Minister to restore her ministry's budget.

Evidently, her request was not met satisfactorily as on October 19, she again stated very clearly, "We still have problems because our cut has not been restored. Literally, it's a month-to-month suspense on whether we can meet wages." This has hit her ministry's plans to fight malnutrition, she added.

My own observation during my visits to remote villages reveals the growing distress of people and reduced access to welfare programmes. Well-informed persons have informed me about the near collapse of Sabla (an important programme for adolescent girls) until it was rescued partially by providing some emergency funds, the non-availability of medicines for HIV-AIDS and other diseases, delays in recruitment of health and nutrition personnel, delays in payments to them, denial of stipends and scholarships to school students and pensions to old persons.

Therefore, the big question before the next Budget is: Will the injustice done to the social sector be made up this time, and in ways which are particularly helpful to the poorest sections? ■

## An angry Dalit film

### Chauranga is about the tyranny of caste

Saibal Chatterjee  
New Delhi

THE India that debutant writer-director Bikas Ranjan Mishra wades into with the hard-hitting caste oppression drama, *Chauranga*, is a blighted world far removed from the la-la land that mainstream Bollywood cinema conjures up for its fans Friday after frenzied Friday.

Yet, Mumbai potboilers and their superstars are alluded to throughout the film, both in lines of dialogue and in entire situations. But in its intricate and dense milieu, song and dance can offer little solace to those whose backs are forever against the wall in a losing battle for dignity.

When a zamindar — the key antagonist in *Chauranga* — treats upper caste men to a feast to mark the inauguration of a new tubewell, there is no place in the celebrations for villagers who exist outside the social charmed circle. The latter have to be content with token sweetmeats.

However, the open-air projection of a Salman Khan blockbuster the same evening unifies them all as they lap up the spectacle on a makeshift screen. But can the few hours of escapist entertainment camouflage the fact that escape is out of the question for the Dalits of the village?

*Chauranga*, which made waves on the international festival circuit before hitting multiplex screens in several cities of the country in early January, stares at the dark reality of caste hierarchy in the face.

Marked by unflinching honesty, it is pointed and provocative in its rendering of Dalit despair. Its pertinent theme is, however, not the only reason why it is an important film.

Filmed on location near Santiniketan and in Odisha's Keonjhar district after plans to set it in Jharkhand fell through, *Chauranga* is especially remarkable for the sustained restraint it employs to address the intertwined themes of caste conflict,



*Chauranga is an engaging story of inequality and discrimination in a village*



*In the film a Dalit boy writes a love letter to an upper caste girl*

gender inequality and sexual repression.

The film eschews dramatic flourish and agitprop posturing, and that significantly heightens the urgency and acuity of its message.

The indie film, produced by Onir's Anticlock Films and actor Sanjay Suri's Kahwa Entertainment besides several other funding entities, is an angry drama that pulls no punches, but the director refrains from getting into combat mode.

Mishra, who wrote 10 drafts of the screenplay

before filming got underway, is more a concerned and disconcerted chronicler than an agitated and confrontational activist. "My intention was simply to probe the severe inequities in our society and tell an engaging story in the bargain," says the 35-year-old filmmaker and critic.

*Chauranga* narrates the tragic tale of a Dalit family — a mother and her two sons who rear pigs for a living. They are at the receiving end of upper caste tyranny in an unnamed village.

As film academic Ira Bhaskar pointed out in the course of a panel discussion at the end of the *Chauranga* premiere in New Delhi, Indian cinema has rarely dealt with the ugliness of the caste system.

"It is easier to tackle the divide between rich and poor on the screen. Caste divisions are a far more complex phenomenon, which explains why our filmmakers have steered clear of it," she said.

Mishra doesn't shy away. The maturity and sense of purpose he invests *Chauranga* with is reminiscent of the spirit of the new Indian cinema that was spearheaded in Mumbai in the 1970s by the likes of Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani.

But at no point does *Chauranga* look or feel like a film that belongs to the past. The reason is obvious:

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not much has changed since Benegal (*Ankur*, *Nishant*) and Nihalani (*Aakrosh*) made their films about caste and class violence in rural India.

“The situation is pretty much the same as it was back then,” says writer-director Mishra. “Only, in many rural pockets, there is much less reason for hope today.”

The idea of *Chauranga* germinated from a news headline about a Bihar boy who was killed in 2008 for writing a love letter to a girl of a higher caste. Around the real-life incident, Mishra constructs a disturbing portrait of a social world in which caste discrimination plays out in shocking ways.

“The village in *Chauranga* is not unlike the village in Hazaribagh (in what is now Jharkhand) that I

years,” says Mishra.

“Directors of the earlier generation believed that things would change for the better for the down-trodden as India went down the path of progress. But that did not happen. Now, of course, development means only shopping malls, bullet trains and highways,” he says.

*Chauranga* is about defenceless people at the mercy of the rich and the powerful. It revolves around a 14-year-old Dalit boy, Santu (played by Soham Maitra), who, oblivious of the caste fissures that run deep in his nondescript little village, develops an infatuation with the daughter of a ruthless landlord.

Santu is helped by Bajrangi to write a love letter to Mona (Ena Saha), the zamindar’s daughter. The



Bikas Mishra (left) with his crew. The film was shot near Santiniketan and in Odisha’s Keonjhar district

grew up in and still have close ties with,” says Mishra.

“Several of the characters in the film, including the blind priest (who represents the face of religious orthodoxy and is played by veteran actor Dhritiman Chatterji), are modelled on people I knew personally as a child,” he adds. “The village reflects my recollections.”

At the outset of the film, the village in *Chauranga*, on the face of it, seems like the most ordinary, innocuous place on the planet. But simmering under its calm surface are violence and tension.

“Atrocities happen in our villages all the time. But these incidents are generally kept away from public view and we continue to live in denial,” says Mishra.

*Chauranga*, for all the mayhem that it incorporates into its screenplay, does not end on a pessimistic note. “I did not want that. My young protagonist is, after all, driven by the spirit of rebellion,” says Mishra, who nursed the film project through a six-year-long struggle.

While the film is primarily about subjugation and brutality, it does not, for its protagonist, rule out the possibility of surviving and starting over. But the price that he has to pay in order to break free isn’t insignificant either.

“My film owes much more to Shyam Benegal’s *Ankur* than to any other film about caste discrimination that might have been made in more recent

consequences are inevitably tragic.

That apart, the boy dreams of going to school like his elder brother, Bajrangi (Riddhi Sen), but his mother who works as a maid in the landlord’s *haveli* does not have the means to help him get there.

The older boy spends much of his time in a nearby town, where his school is located. The younger sibling, therefore, sees education as his ticket out of this world that he hates.

Their mother, Dhaniya (Tannishtha Chatterjee) has an illicit relationship with the zamindar, Dhaval (Sanjay Suri), and hopes that her liaison with the powerful man will do the trick for her younger son. But *Chauranga* has an open-ended climax: it does not let the audience off the hook by offering easy closure.

While *Chauranga*’s principal female character, Dhaniya, is no pushover, Dhaval’s wife, Nidhi (Arpita Chatterjee), is a victim of deeply entrenched patriarchy. There is another woman in the landlord’s household, his Ramcharit Manas-reciting mother (Swatilekha Sengupta). But the reasoned voices of these women are of no consequence in this malevolent universe.

Mishra’s empathy with the underdog is unmistakable. By going where Hindi cinema rarely does, his maiden film heralds the arrival of a strong and unique voice in Mumbai’s independent cinema. ■

# Kerala’s history in a nutshell

Susheela Nair  
Bengaluru

THE Muziris Heritage Site is perhaps India’s biggest archaeological discovery. Tucked behind the bylanes of the unpretentious temple town of Kodungallur, about an hour’s drive from Kochi, the site is steeped in myths, legends and local lore. An abundance of history unfolds at every twist of the narrow, meandering roads of Kodungallur, near the delta of the Periyar, the longest river in Kerala.

Dating back to the first century BC, the Muziris seaport is reputed to have been the greatest trading centre of the ancient East and India’s gateway to the civilisations of the world at a time when the term ‘globalisation’ was unheard of.

Ancient mariners anchored at this bustling trading port 3,000 years ago. Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, Egyptians and the Chinese thronged to this primeval spice town to trade in almost everything from spices to precious stones and silk.

But Muziris subsequently disappeared without a trace, presumably because of the floods in the Periyar that altered the geography of the region. In the event, Cochin emerged as the major port while the kingdom of Muziris was lost and forgotten. Subsequently, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British came to trade, became part of an international power struggle and left their imprints on the region.

In Sanskrit, the entrepot of Muziris was known as Murachipattanam or Spice City. In Sangam literature, Muziris becomes Muchiri, and later Muyirikkode. The port town features in the writings of Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79). People also cite references to the place in the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamsa*. Ancient astronomy texts say that Kodungallur had a decent observatory around AD 860.

This fabled port is believed to have served as the gateway to India for three major religions — Judaism, Christianity and later Islam. Muziris is also home to India’s first church, first mosque and oldest monument.

St Thomas is said to have landed here in AD 52 and founded India’s first church here, and then at six other places on the Malabar coast. The very first mosque in India was built here in AD 629, by the last Chera king, Cheraman Perumal, who, according to oral history, is said to have died on his jour-

SUSHEELA NAIR



The backwaters of Kodungallur

SUSHEELA NAIR



The Mar Thoma Pontifical Shrine

ney back from Mecca. The Jews arrived in Muziris in AD 69 after the desecration of Jerusalem and built a colony. Then, of course, there is the 2,000-year-old Thiruvanchikulam Mahadeva temple and the 'most powerful' and controversial Hindu goddess at the Sri Kurumba Kavu.

Until now, it was natural beauty that lured tourists to Kerala. However, Kerala Tourism has changed its marketing strategy to promote culture and history among modern travellers. The historical monuments and materials available through excavation make Muziris a unique location to tell the story of Kerala up to 3,000 years.

Like a hidden jewel, Muziris shot into the lime-light with archaeological discoveries which con-

nected the place to people and trade. Tourists can walk through history on the Muziris Heritage Tourism Circuit — through layers of Dutch, Portuguese, Roman and Arabian history. This is one of India's biggest archaeological conservation projects that conserves three millennia of heritage.

The state and Central governments are investing ₹140 crore in the Muziris Heritage Project (MHP), encompassing six panchayats and two municipalities. "The integrated circuit of monuments and events will largely be connected through an enchanting riverine tour that connects the sites. Rivers and canals are being cleaned and jetties built for this tour. The MHP is a network connecting about 100 museums, palaces, forts, temples, church-

SUSHEELA NAIR



India's first mosque: the Cheraman Perumal Juma Masjid

es, synagogues and other historical monuments, along with traditional weekly fairs. The focus will be on community participation, improvement of the local economy, generation of employment for the local community and promoting traditional skills and craftsmanship. The project largely focuses on sustaining the local communities by getting them involved in heritage tourism," says Benny Kuriakose, conservation consultant to the project.

It all started with archaeological excavation in Pattanam, about 30 km north of Kochi, which many believed to be the port city of Muziris. Archaeology reveals evidence of a "multicultural, urban and maritime society that existed there for 3,000 years". There is speculation that Pattanam could have been Muziris.

The exact location of Muziris, however, remained a mystery. A series of excavations has been carried out on the site which extends from north Paravur district in Ernakulam to Kodungallur in Thrissur district.

Today, the entire stretch is dotted with monuments and buildings and is an outstanding specimen of markets, streets, footways, bridges and cemeteries, among other fascinating constructions of eras gone by.

The site has some of the oldest mosques, churches and ancient Jewish synagogues in Paravur and Chendamangalam which speak volumes of cultural tolerance and peaceful coexistence, so relevant in today's world.

Excavations at Kottapuram Fort have thrown up interesting links to the past. The ancient markets of Kottapuram and Paravur, which thrive even today, and the Paliyam Palace, the seat of the Paliath Achans who served as the prime ministers of Cochin, have been restored.

As part of the initiative, several circuit tours are being worked on for those who would like to visit the site. An effort is also being made to establish a market here without disturbing the existing layout and character of the original marketplace to retain the old world charm of the area.

In addition, museums and sites like the Pallipuram Fort, Paravur market and so on will be opened to the public to provide a better insight into the multicultural history of this ancient port city. "This is not a tourism project in the conventional sense as we are not putting up hotels," explains Kuriakose. The heritage project is the first of its kind in India and will be, when completed, a major destination for cultural tourism. ■

## FACT FILE

**Getting there:** Kochi (40 km) is the nearest international airport and a convenient railhead.

# The Bangladesh story

**Kavita Charanji**  
New Delhi

PROFESSOR Rehman Sobhan says he has sung four national anthems during his lifetime: God Save the Queen, *Jana Gana Mana*, *Pak Sarzamin* and *Amar Sonar Bangla*.

"I don't know if there are many people around who can make that sort of claim but it shows how one's life has evolved over the years," Professor Sobhan remarked ruefully during the release of his recent book, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfilment*, at the India International Centre in New Delhi. Former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, his Cambridge colleague, released the book.

Professor Sobhan is founder-chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a think-tank in Dhaka. Born in Calcutta, Sobhan went to St Paul's School, Darjeeling, and to Aitchison College in Lahore. He then studied economics at Cambridge University.

Professor Sobhan could have easily slipped into the privileged life of a businessman, had he listened to his father. Instead, he found his calling as a respected academic, economist and intellectual in erstwhile East Pakistan where he threw himself into the maelstrom of the freedom struggle that culminated in the bloody birth of Bangladesh.

*Civil Society* talked to Professor Sobhan about his book, his Cambridge days and his perspective on the formation of Bangladesh.

**There is a good body of literature about Bangladesh's Liberation War. Where does your book break new ground?**

My book is a memoir. It was not the Liberation War I was writing about. My intention was to highlight my trajectory which began in a fairly elite world. In the normal course of events I would have had no place as a participant in the Liberation War. It was this transition in my life that I have presented.

The climax of my story was the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, the great events that erupted, the peripheral role and, in some cases, quite active role that I played in the realisation of this new country.

I thought that my personal story had some resonance because there is an entire generation that has come from that background but moved on in different directions.

My main story is about the emergence of Bangladesh. It has been presented not just from the Bangladesh perspective, but from the perspective of someone who had firsthand exposure to the evolution of events as they led to

the Liberation War.

A lot of books have been written on the subject, not only in India, but also abroad, like *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* by Gary J. Bass which came out in New York last year. The main emphasis in this book was on the US response. The book was a major critique of the way Nixon and Kissinger reacted to the events that were taking place and how they tried to cover up because they wanted to maintain a good relationship with Pakistan. Simultaneously, Professor Srinath



Dr Manmohan Singh launches Prof. Rehman Sobhan's book in Delhi

Raghavan's book, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*, also came out. It, of course, depended heavily on Indian documentation and papers. The book focused on India's participation in the Liberation War. A number of other studies have basically looked at the Indo-US element in the war.

The Bangladesh story has been underreported. I thought, in that sense, a perspective on how we – who were actually at the receiving end – viewed it was an important story that needed to be told. No one should believe that the liberation of Bangladesh was just the outcome of the fact that the Indian Army could seek the surrender of the Pakistan Army. The processes which led to that are very important but not the central element of the story.

**Any particular reason you went into politics? You have mentioned that your political perspectives were shaped largely at Cambridge.**

Since my university days I had this urge to play an influencing role in bringing about social change. If you have any sort of political inclination you have to locate it in some geographic political space, otherwise you end up as an international freelancer who writes articles in newspapers but can't really participate in the real world of politics.

As a university teacher throughout

this process, I and others like me were actively engaged from a fairly early stage in trying to influence political opinion. Through that we were drawn directly into the world of politics. The leader of the political democratic movement in erstwhile East Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, drew on us and used our ideas. He brought us in to provide professional advice.

**In your book you have mentioned Amartya Sen as one of your contemporaries at Cambridge. How did you relate to him?**

Amartya Sen was one of my closest friends and remains so. I was the president of the Cambridge Majlis and he was the treasurer. The Majlis, a historical society that dates back to the 19th century, was a forum for students from the Indian subcontinent,

AJIT KRISHNA

then made up of India and Ceylon, to socialise and engage in political debate and discussion. The Majlis had among its alumni Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and other prospective leaders of South Asia.

Dr Manmohan Singh was also in the Majlis. He was bookish, worked in the library and was exceedingly shy in his interactions but he became one of the top economists.

**Why did your first book, *Basic Democracies, Works Programme and Rural Development in East Pakistan*, attract attention?**

In my book I focused on the way Field Marshal Ayub Khan, who had taken over power in Pakistan, was using aid and development to try and build a support base for himself by channelling public resources to a small group of the

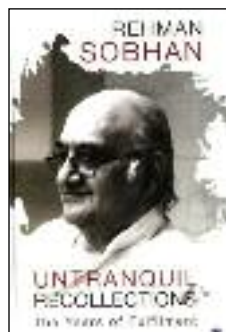
elite in rural areas. Many people thought of this as a great success story.

**At that stage, you were very critical of the World Bank?**

We thought of the World Bank and the US government in the 1960s as the main patrons of the Ayub dictatorship. They were giving him enough aid to make what he was doing into a success story, not realising that their actions were basically sponsoring and strengthening the hold of an undemocratic regime led by the field marshal.

Interestingly, in 1971 the World Bank played quite a constructive role because they reported on the genocide in Bangladesh in the aid consortium meetings. The aid community then decided to suspend pledging US aid to Pakistan. While our political campaign in the US was directed at getting the US Senate to pass legislation to stop aid to Pakistan, we were also targeting the World Bank and the other members of the aid consortium.

This was my whole campaign in 1971 in the US, Europe and UK because we felt that the regime in Pakistan should not get resources which would mostly be channelled against us. Finally, in the US, they tabled this Bill known as the Saxby-Church Amendment that was designed to stop aid to Pakistan as long as they were committing genocide in Bangladesh. This Bill was passed in the Senate. This was another big success even though the Nixon Administration lobbied to defeat it. ■



*Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfilment*  
Rehman Sobhan  
Sage  
₹1,250



# Why did Oliver jump?

Anjana Basu  
Kolkata

THERE are people who think that animals — mainly pets — are just entertaining sloppy creatures to have around and cherish. Most people would agree that dogs are capable of being unhappy and some vegetarians protest that cows and chickens know when they are going to the slaughterhouse.

Laurel Braitman's study of the emotional states of the animal world starts with a very personal experience — her Bernese mountain dog, Oliver, who jumped out of a fourth-floor window when he was left alone in the author's apartment. A little boy who lived opposite sees the dog falling and tells his mother about a "dog that fell out of the sky".

A shocked Braitman starts to try to understand what kind of trauma could make Oliver suicidal.

There has been an undercurrent of experimentation with animal emotion — Pavlov's tests on con-

ditioning, for example, but Rene Descartes, famous for "I think therefore I am" tended to sweep away animal philosophy with his declaration that animals did not think and therefore were just a kind of a living machine not made in God's image. Most scientists followed Descartes, though Darwin in his 1872 treatise *On the Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* insisted that man was just another kind of animal.

Today the Cartesian theory has fallen by the wayside but most people now insist that humans tend to project their own emotions on animals and so create a cult of sentimentality which in its own way is equally unfair. This has gone side by side with Jane Goodall's experiences with the great apes and tales of communication with dolphins.

Braitman shares a fascinating set of research which proves that animals are very similar to humans in their emotional highs and lows and they respond in the same way to the medication that they may be given; most psychotropic drugs are after all first tested on animals, proving that scientists do admit a similarity in the systemic make-up of all members of the animal kingdom.

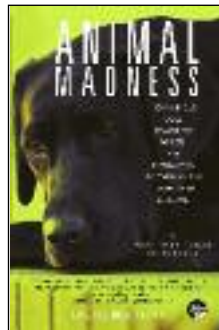
Braitman combines the scientific and the personal with in-depth research to

create a readable narrative. Though her style is light, the undercurrent is deeply upsetting which makes it a very difficult book to go through. Anthropomorphism is hard to avoid in this case since people project their own experiences of depression, anxiety and trauma onto animals, but the important thing is to be sensitive to what it means.

Animal grief, animal joy must necessarily be different from that of humans, since they exist in a parallel emotional universe. The ones closest to human

beings in experience are of course the great apes —and we are told of young ape mothers in zoos being shown nursing human mothers to give them a better idea of how to look after their babies, since they are far from the wild where they would have learnt from their own troop of older females. Many zoo animals are — she adds — on anti-depressants because of confinement in a strange world outside their control and even pets can be prone to depression.

The author suggests people spend more time outdoors playing with animals for a purely selfish reason — both people and animals will benefit. Those curious to know about Oliver's fate will be sad to hear that he died later — and the cause was probably stress-related. ■



*Animal Madness*  
How Anxious Dogs,  
Compulsive Parrots,  
and Elephants in  
Recovery Help Us  
Understand Ourselves  
Laurel Braitman  
Speaking Tiger Books  
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## Village spices up rural tourism

Bharat Dogra  
Sirsi

LOCATED in the lush Western Ghats, Uttara Kannada is known for its fragrant spice gardens of cardamom, pepper and the areca nut. A rural tourism project called Spice Route Suharda Sahakari Niyamitha (Sustainable Tourism Cooperative based on Spice Garden Walks) has sprung up here at Hulgol in Sirsi taluk, a seven-hour drive from Bengaluru, where tourists can wander around the spice gardens and enjoy a slice of village life.

Sitaram Hegde is the young and enthusiastic coordinator of the project. "Our cooperative has 25 active members and 20 in a supportive role," he explains. "Sixteen women are involved in housekeeping and related activities. We have five youthful male guides. We have a tie-up with Village Ways, a holiday company that promotes community tourism. They send us guests, mostly from Europe."

"But we'd like to have more domestic guests. People who have come here just to try it out have been very happy with our arrangements," he added.

The guesthouse is clean and simple and equipped with bedrooms and bathrooms. There is a cattle shed, a biogas plant and a compost pit on its premises. People here are very friendly and happy to invite guests into their homes. Tourists can witness marriages if they coincide with their stay, take part in school functions and generally be part of the village community.

Apart from the spice gardens and forest trails the village has some tourist spots nearby: the famous Jog Falls, Yana rock formations, temples and crum-

bling forts. Taxi services are also available.

Fresh vegetables and other foods are procured from local farmers. "The idea is to provide maximum benefits to villagers. After paying the wages of all employees, a share of profit is also given to the village community. All tips given to guides and others are collected and shared equally. A share also goes to the village community," says Girish, a guide.



Hulgol's spice gardens are an attraction

The kitchen is spacious and guests can learn to cook the local cuisine. "Some of them love to make rotis. Villagers also find such interactions interesting," said Sitaram.

"Village youth now feel that instead of migrating to cities in search of uncertain employment, they have an option in this tourism project."

Mike Schutz, a researcher from the University of Texas who spent a week here, said, "I feel that this kind of small-scale tourism is more capable of being

eco-friendly. Bigger projects tend to displace people and have other adverse impacts, while such small projects can be carefully planned and implemented to ensure that people benefit, their livelihoods are promoted but adverse impacts are avoided."

Pandurang Hegde, the well-known activist of the Appiko movement, which like the Chipko movement sought to protect the environment, says, "We wanted to find alternatives to destructive tourism and this is why we initiated this effort."

The nearby town of Sirsi has a rich history of forming cooperatives. There is the Totigarha Seva Society that provides marketing opportunities to its members. Farmers in Sirsi, Sidhapur and Yellapur can bring their produce of pepper, areca nut and cardamom here. The cooperative has electronic auction arrangements to help farmers get a good price.

There is also the Kadamba Marketing Sonharda Cooperative that has been working for about a decade to help farmers sell their produce at a fair rate. The cooperative promotes organic farming. It is a delight to visit its retail outlet in Sirsi which stocks a wide range of neatly packaged products such as cardamom, honey, white and black pepper and value-added products like banana and jackfruit chips, kokum and pineapple squash, amla and banana candies, and jackfruit bars. Apart from selling forest produce, the cooperative collects and markets several kinds of non-timber forest produce (NTFP). It has been organising a jackfruit festival since 2007. Tourists can visit the cooperatives and come back loaded with fresh spices and local healthy foods. ■

To visit Hulgol village contact Sitaram Hegde, Coordinator: 09448129648

## Chanderi magic

TUCKED away in a small stall at the Dastkar Haat was a treasure trove of lovely Chanderi saris in a range of colours and designs. Stacks of wispy dupattas and matching salwar suits with light *zari* work, just right for an evening out, completed the picture.

They had all been made by a cluster of weavers called Chanderiyaan in the historic town of Chanderi. "We were languishing," said Saiful Islam, block manager of the Chanderiyaan cluster. "Weavers were running away to cities to become labour."

The Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) stepped into this bleak picture.

It mobilised the weavers and helped them learn to design sari patterns digitally. The weavers are now computer-savvy. "It used to take us three to four days to design a motif. Doing it on a computer saves us time. The design is very accurate and it doesn't get lost. We now have some 19,000 designs stored online and many are heritage pieces," said Shadab, assistant designer at Chanderiyaan. The main design is the intricate motif that is woven with a single *zari* thread, he explains.

The makers of Chanderi had nowhere to work from. DEF renovated an old ramshackle palace called Rajarani Mahal, provided looms, helped buy raw materials, and created a supply and demand



chain. Chanderiyaan has its own e-commerce site. Every sari that is sold online has the name of the weaver who made it. Any weaver in Chanderi can approach Chanderiyaan for help. "Sales are improving and our styles are now market-oriented. Traditional or fancy we do both," he said. Chanderi saris are in light cotton and silk. Chanderi fabric can be converted into household furnishing: curtains, tablecloths and cushion covers. ■

**Shop Chanderi** at: [www.chanderiyaan.net](http://www.chanderiyaan.net),  
saif.tit@gmail.com  
Phone: 9098653189, 9301159858

## Smart stove

THE Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) has developed a stove that uses agri-industrial waste for burning but doesn't emit smoke. It produces a clear blue flame. Named the My Forest Biomass Gasifier, the stove reduces indoor air pollution and saves forests.

In rural India people still prefer to cook with wood. So women walk miles into forests and then walk back with a pile of firewood on their heads. A lot of time and energy is spent. The wood is burnt in smoky stoves and harms the lungs of rural women. The forest also suffers. Chopping wood results in deforestation. Cooking should not kill forests, says AERF. It has been conserving sacred groves and trees in the Western Ghats.

The My Forest stove is made of stainless steel, including its burners. The stove and burner have insulating handles. AERF has developed catechu chips left over from small-scale *pan-katha* units as an efficient replacement for firewood. There is a net made of steel inside the stove for holding the catechu chips. AERF has also developed a supply chain so that women can get a continuous supply of chips. But any wood in chip form can be used as fuel.

The stove costs around ₹2000. It can be used by individual homes and by village schools to cook the midday meal. ■

**Contact:** Hasit Trivedi: 8554863999, Ram Penumarathy: 7218430970  
Website: [www.aerfindia.org](http://www.aerfindia.org)





**Skill training provides employment for rural youth.**

After I graduated from college, I wanted to work and support my parents who get a meagre income as daily wage agriculture labourers. The only opportunity for employment in my village was working as a farm hand that was poorly paid seasonal work. Without any job prospects and income, I was depressed to be financially burden on my family.

SST team help me in finding a suitable job for my qualifications. They enrolled me in a 10 days youth development training program in soft skills. Once I completed the training, I got a job in a KFC restaurant in Mysore. Now I have a regular income of ₹ 7000 per month. This helps me to meet my need and also contribute to family income.

**Mr. Chaluva Nayaka**  
Kembal village, Mysore district, Karnataka.

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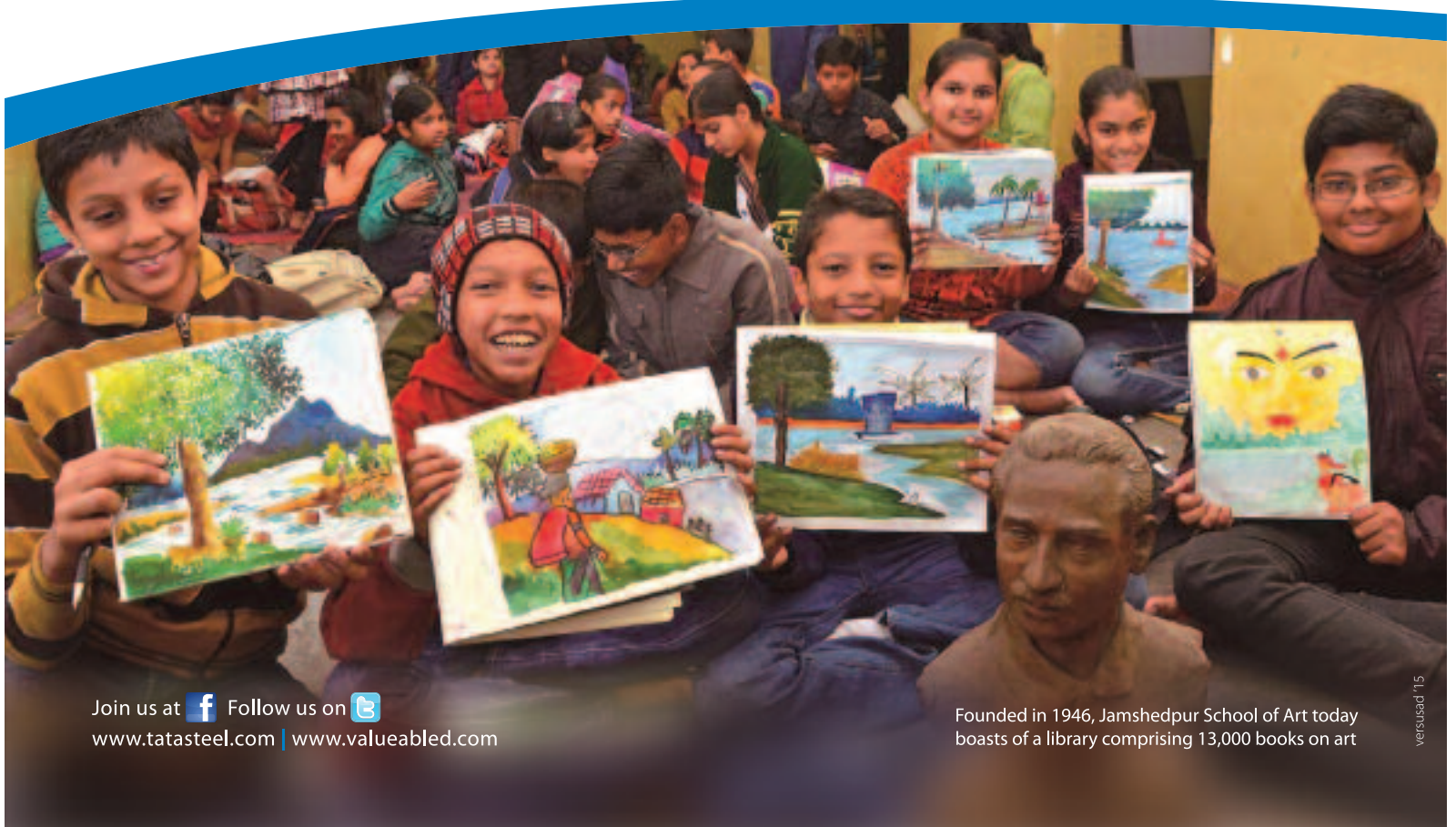
# SHAPING THE FUTURE

## Education - the key to a sustainable future

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Founded in 1946, Jamshedpur School of Art today boasts of a library comprising 13,000 books on art